ROU BAO BU CHI ROU

The Husky & His White Cat Shizun

11

ERHA HE TA DE BAI MAO SHIZUN

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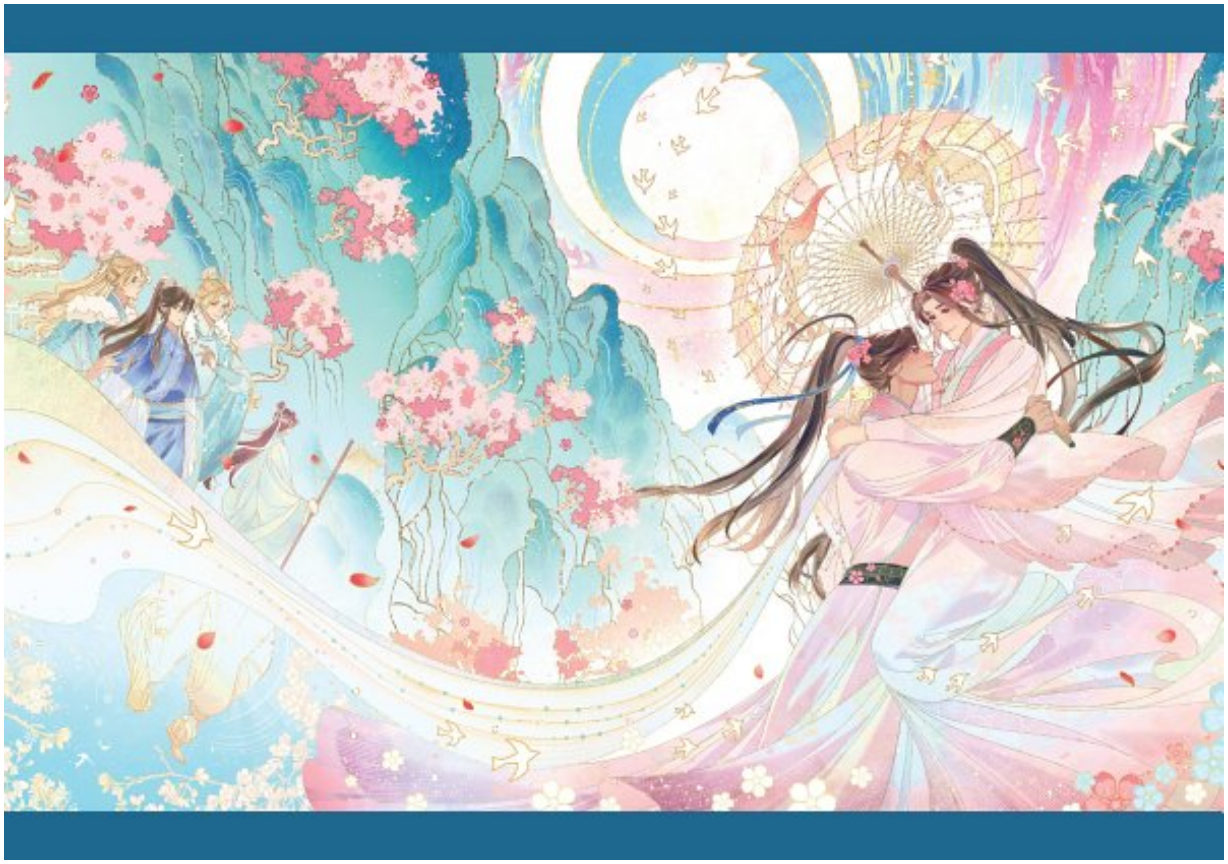

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WRITTEN BY
Rou Bao Bu Chi Rou

ILLUSTRATED BY
St

TRANSLATED BY
Jun, Rui, & Yu

Seven Seas

Seven Seas Entertainment

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Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to
Marketing Manager Lauren Hill at press@gomanga.com.
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TRANSLATION: Jun, Rui, Yu
ADAPTATION: Neon Yang
COVER DESIGN: M. A. Lewife
INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner
INTERIOR LAYOUT: Karis Page
COPY EDITOR: Jehanne Bell
PROOFREADER: Jack Hamm, Hnā
QUALITY CONTROL: Meg van Huygen
EDITOR: Kelly Quinn Chiu
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Salvador Chan Jr., April Malig, Jules Valera
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

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Xue Mengmeng's Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 1

IN RECENT DAYS, a new spiritual device had taken the cultivation world by storm: the Matching Scroll. Developed by Master Ma of Taobao Estate, only two lines of text appeared on the cover of the device's user guide, in strong, bold calligraphy script:

With scroll in hand, no need to dread,

This magic item will get you wed!

Xue Meng first learned of the Matching Scroll while training at Sisheng Peak's Dancing Sword Platform. He wiped Longcheng down with a square of white silk and turned in irritation toward the Taobao Estate disciple earnestly trying to recommend it to him. "What the hell are you talking about? Why's Ma Yun think I need this kind of junk?"

"Um… Ma-zhuangzhu said Xue-zhangmen works too hard and doesn't have time to get to know any nice young ladies. Over the past two years, he's learned a lot from your shizun Chu-zongshi and made huge strides in refining magical devices. He wants to thank Sisheng Peak, so… the Matching Scroll was designed specifically with Xue-zhangmen in mind."

Xue Meng was immediately incensed. Longcheng flashed, and the white handkerchief fluttered to the ground, sliced cleanly in half. "For me? Absurd. Do I *look* like I can't get girls?"

The Taobao Estate disciple looked the prime specimen Sect Leader Xue over from head to toe, swallowed hard, and nervously tried again. "Well, if you'd p-prefer to get guys, we can help with that too."

Xue Meng stared at him in silence, his face turning almost green with fury. In the brisk wind atop the Dancing Sword Platform, he stabbed Longcheng back into its sheath and snapped, "Attendants!"

"Yes, Sect Leader!"

"Get him out of here!" Xue Meng said with a scowl.

“At once, Sect Leader!”

A wise choice on Xue Meng’s part. Ma Yun was a business tycoon; he certainly wasn’t that invested in matchmaking. It was true that he’d developed the Matching Scroll, and also true that it could identify suitable partners for cultivators. But to say Master Ma had done it for Sect Leader Xue’s sake—well, that would be a big fat lie.

There could be only one reason he was trying to pull Xue Meng into this, and that was simple: He wanted to attract female cultivators.

After the last great battle, the cultivation realm had been turned on its head. Sisheng Peak became one of the greatest sects in the world overnight, and of course many entries in the *God-Knows-What Rankings* had to be reshuffled. Xue Meng himself ended up topping several charts, and he had swiftly become the newest heartthrob among girls his own age.

As a businessman who kept his finger squarely on the pulse of things, Master Ma naturally monitored those best-selling *God-Knows-What Ranking*s. One dark and stormy night, as he cheerfully ate watermelon and picked happily at his feet, he flipped through the newest rankings and clucked his tongue.

“No. 1 Hero, Chu Wanning. Status: In seclusion.

“No. 2 Hero, Mo Weiyu. Status: Same as above.”

After spitting out a long stream of melon seeds, Master Ma mumbled to his trusted subordinate: “Ah, if only they were single. If we could get them to sign on, girls would go crazy fighting to buy a Matching Scroll. Terrible shame.”

He held up the little sketch of Chu Wanning to drive home his point. “See? You know, I never noticed before, but he’s really quite a looker. Chu-zongshi is so handsome, the perfect picture of an ethereal immortal.”

“Sect Leader,” his subordinate replied docilely. “I’ve never had any particular eye for beauty. It’s best to keep me out of these discussions.”

Master Ma nodded. “You’re right. You do have bad taste. I’ll keep my own counsel.” But a mere few minutes later, his head popped back up. “What do you think about Mei Hanxue?”

The subordinate maintained his deferential air. “He’s surrounded by admirers even without a matchmaking device. He won’t be interested.”

“Ohh, you’re right about that one.”

Another few minutes passed.

“What about Jiang Xi?”

“The man is ruthless. Sect Leader, you’re too kind and trusting. It’s best not to do business with people like Jiang-zunzhu unless you want to go flat broke. And, I’m sorry to say, sir, given his temper, if he found out you wanted to use him as bait for girls to buy the Matching Scroll, he’d probably turn you into a human pig and send you to spend your golden years with the other swine in Guyueye’s pigpen.”

Master Ma patted the man’s head with a smile. “Little guy, I love it when you give it to me straight.”

After more back-and-forth of the same kind, Master Ma made up his mind. “Why don’t we try Xue Meng? He might not rank highly in wealth or height, but his face is top-of-the-line. He’s a newly minted sect leader, plus, he’s about the right age for such things… Well, why not? Send someone to talk him into it, will you?”

And thus was born the nonsensical spiel the Taobao Estate disciple had whipped out before the handsome young sect leader.

Xue Meng was furious. He’d gotten much better at reining in his temper ever since he’d taken up his position as sect leader, so the sight of him in such a temper was rare indeed.

“Sect Leader, what’s wrong?” asked the Xuanji Elder carefully. “Is something bothering you?”

Xue Meng gritted his teeth. “I don’t get it,” he squeezed out. “Plenty of people are single. Why’s that Ma bastard so hung up on me?”

The Xuanji Elder was sharp as a tack. He quickly realized Xue Meng had been jabbed in a sore spot. “You’re the sect leader now,” he said. “It’s only natural for people to pay more attention to you.”

“Why doesn’t he go pay Jiang Xi that attention?”

“Jiang-zhangmen looks young, but he’s gotten on in years after all. When he was young, he had plenty of admirers too.”

This only upset Xue Meng further. A pang went through his heart as he thought of his mother, and how callous Jiang Yechen had been in his youth. How much had his mom suffered at the hands of that man? But his relationship with Jiang Xi was a deadly secret, so he merely cursed and changed the subject. “Then why doesn’t that Ma bastard go talk to Mei Hanxue?”

The Xuanji Elder favored him with a wry smile. “Sect Leader, if Mei-xianzhang were on the marriage market, both the upper and lower cultivation realms would devolve into chaos yet again.”

Xue Meng fell silent. “Th-th-th-th-then—”

But no matter how long he stuttered, he couldn’t come up with a third eligible bachelor. Back when Xue Zhengyong had urged his son to find a partner, he had still been able to hide behind Chu Wanning and Mo Ran—but if he were to bring them up now, he’d look only more pitifully alone. Frustration stuck in Xue Meng’s chest like a rock, becoming more firmly lodged the more he tried to get rid of it. The rims of his eyes went red in indignation.

“But it doesn’t make any sense!” he snapped, giving up. “If or when I get married is none of their business! Maybe they should get a life! Goodbye!”

With a haughty sweep of his sleeves—a move learned from his shizun—he stalked away.

Xue Meng earnestly wished for Master Ma’s newest project to end in failure, but reality, as it so often did, refused to obey his wishes. Even without Xue Meng’s help, the Matching Scroll swept through the cultivation world like wildfire just a few months later.

“What’s wrong with the world these days?” Xue Meng asked in furious disbelief. “Does everyone have so much free time on their hands?”

The Xuanji Elder was much more even-handed in his assessment. “Now, that’s not fair. New Year’s was two months ago, Sect Leader. Over

the holidays all the elders in the family urge the young ones to hurry up and get married. Ma-zhuangzhu's Matching Scroll might've just solved the most pressing issue for a great deal of the jianghu's youth. It makes perfect sense they'd sell out."

Xue Meng said nothing.

"And I heard the scroll is a clever little device. Even if you're not trying to find a partner, it's fun to play with a new gadget."

"How so?"

"I'm not sure," said Xuanji gently. "But the Tanlang Elder picked one up to see what all the fuss was about. He says it's boring, but nine out of ten times when I go to his place, he's fiddling with it."

That shocked Xue Meng. "Isn't the Tanlang Elder uninterested in remarrying?"

"Mn. Of course he's uninterested." Xuanji smiled. "He's just childish that way; he likes shiny new things. The scroll is entertaining him."

Xue Meng stared. Tanlang, *childish*?

He didn't know what to say. Xuanji and Tanlang had joined Sisheng Peak at the same time. Tanlang had always been caustic and standoffish; he and Chu Wanning mixed about as well as fire and water. Xuanji was the only one who could not only start a conversation with Chu Wanning but also soothe Tanlang's ruffled feathers. And perhaps the only one who could so easily call the acid-tongued Tanlang "childish" as well.

Xuanji Elder chuckled. "Sect Leader, if you're curious, why don't you get one and see?"

Xue Meng cleared his throat. "Never," he said haughtily. "I stand as the leader of the whole sect. Of course I have no interest in shoddy little trinkets."

The very next night, the lights in Loyalty Hall blazed bright behind its tightly sealed sandalwood doors. Sect Leader Xue had announced that he would cultivate in seclusion that night. He ordered all the high-ranking disciples who served him to stand guard outside the doors with instructions that he was not to be disturbed even if the world was ending—with an

exception made for the Yuheng Elder, if he should happen to come down from Nanping Mountain.

All the disciples admired Sect Leader Xue for his tireless drive. Moved, each of them loyally swore not to let their guard down for a moment.

What none of them knew was that Sect Leader Xue was presently sitting on the rebuilt dais of Loyalty Hall, studying a jade scroll. Upon its surface were embossed the words *Matching Scroll.*

Yes, precisely so—Master Ma's best-selling device. It'd just arrived earlier that day.

Mindful of his image, Xue Meng had made sure to order it under the Xuanji Elder's name. The young Sect Leader Xue studied the Matching Scroll carefully. He could tell it was made of a special jade and suffused with spiritual energy; golden text in a flowing hand appeared on its surface at will. Visually at least, it was a beautiful item.

Xue Meng did as the user guide said and recited the unsealing incantation.

"The lamp, still lit, joined by dawn's frosty hue, a lone sleeper rises from a bed meant for two. How long is the night for one who yet yearns, far longer still than the world's twists and turns."[1]

After this sappy little couplet was read aloud, new lines of text unfurled mischievously atop the jade scroll.

Well well well. Spring has come and even the swallows have paired off, but Xianzhang, still no luck for you?

Xue Meng stared.

Place your trust in Taobao Estate and allow yourself a chance at love! Avoid the awkwardness of matchmakers and break barriers between the upper and lower cultivation realms. With the Matching Scroll, you'll never again be jealous of other people's romance. Find your own love story!

Xue Meng stared harder.

Please pick a username.

Huh? A name? Clueless yet determined to do this right, Xue Meng picked it up and enunciated carefully. “My name is Xue,” he said. “Xue Meng.”

The scroll remained inert.

“Or Xue Ziming,” he added.

This time, new gold text appeared—

A Gentle Reminder from Master Ma: When using the scroll, please use a nickname such as “Jack-of-All-Trades Ma,” or “Beff Jezos.” This device was developed by Taobao Estate of West Lake; all usernames starting with the characters “Guyueye” will be rejected. Thank you.

Xue Meng frowned. “Did Jiang Xi set that Ma bastard off again?”

His personal opinions about Jiang Xi aside, Guyueye’s enemies had nothing to do with him. Looking around, Xue Meng glimpsed his mom’s orange cat Veggiebun puddled on the carpet, licking his paw. “Call me Veggiebun,” he said to the scroll. He patted the cat on the head. “Sorry, let me borrow your name for a bit.”

The cat ducked out from under his hand and continued grooming itself.

Xue Meng sensed derision in that feline gaze—Veggiebun seemed to be telling him something. After some thought, realization dawned. All of Sisheng Peak knew his mom’s cat’s name was Veggiebun; if he went by such a name, wouldn’t his identity be totally obvious? It wouldn’t work at all.

Sighing, Xue Meng stroked the cat again. “You’re so thoughtful.”

“Mrow…”

Sect Leader Xue pondered the problem. He stared at his mother’s potted pollia flowers, then at the paintings of Jiangnan his father had hung on the wall, and ended up choosing a name devoid of a single ounce of creativity—

“Call me Wang Xiao-Xue.”

Sisheng Peak’s terrible naming skills were, it appeared, hereditary. Xue Zhengyong had given Shi Mei the name Xue Ya—*Little Girl*—and

coined the Aaaaah and Waaah Cliffs; Mo Ran had named his holy weapon Jiangui—*What the Hell*—and now Xue Meng had picked the username Wang Xiao-Xue—*Wang*, his mother's surname, and Xiao-Xue, as in *Xue Junior*. None of them was in any position to talk.

Presented with this terrible choice of username, the jade scroll proceeded to make a happy little mistake. The gold text that appeared after Xue Meng finished speaking was: *Got it, Wang Xiaoxue-xianjun.*

Xue Meng's mouth fell open in astonishment. "I said Wang Xiao-Xue, as in Xue Junior, not Wang Little Snowflake, okay?!"

New gold text appeared. *The spell to change usernames is still in development. Apologies, Wang Xiaoxue-xianjun. Edits are currently not possible.*

Xue Meng's temper was rising. *You're the one who heard wrong*, he thought. *Why can't it be edited?* But there was no point getting mad at an inanimate object. After all, it was just a toy to fiddle with; who cared what it thought?

"Fine, whatever." Xue Meng was out of patience. "Wang Little Snowflake it is. Girly-ass name, but whatever."

Wang Xiaoxue-xianjun, so I can get to know you better, please follow the Matching Scroll's prompts and complete the questionnaire. Once you've finished, the Matching Scroll will show you the candidates that suit you best. May you swiftly find your other half and ideal partner in life!

Xue Meng wasn't interested in any ideal partner, but he *was* curious who, in all the vastness of the cultivation world, the Matching Scroll would identify as the most likely candidates.

"Go ahead," he said boldly.

First question. Have you ever had your heart broken?

Starting off strong, it seemed. Stroking his chin, Xue Meng said, "No."

Great. Second question. Have you ever dated anyone?

"No."

Great. Third question. Have you ever had a crush on anyone?

“No.”

Great. Fourth question. Has anyone ever confessed their feelings to you?

“No.”

This time, the jade scroll didn’t compliment him. It hesitated slightly before the next line of gold text appeared. *Have you been cursed to repeat yourself forever?*

“No means no,” said Xue Meng grumpily. “What do you mean, repeat myself? Should I be making things up?”

Apologies, my mistake. Question five. How old are you this year?

Xue Meng didn’t want to say his exact age. “Twenty-something,” he mumbled.

Thank you. Wang Xiaoxue-xianzhang, in the past twenty-something years of life, you’ve never dated, never had a crush, never been confessed to, and never had your heart broken.

“Correct.”

Understood, Wang Xiaoxue-xianzhang. I will ask the sixth question shortly, but before that, I’d like to know if you prefer those who are honest or those who beat around the bush.

Xue Meng scowled. “Ridiculous. I prefer honest people. Who likes beating around the bush?”

Very well. The jade scroll wouldn’t sugarcoat it. *Sixth question. Are you very ugly?*

Xue Meng was totally flabbergasted.

After a moment of silence, the disciples outside Loyalty Hall heard the sound of something smashing, as well as the orange cat’s terrified yowl.

It had to be said that Taobao Estate’s magical devices had improved greatly within the last few years. The Matching Scroll stayed whole and unharmed despite Xue Meng’s assault, the lines of glittery gold text continuing to persuade Sect Leader Xue to finish answering the last few questions.

When the questionnaire was completed, twenty illusory playing cards materialized and flew one after another into Xue Meng's hands—or rather, they looked like playing cards. Instead of suits, they were printed with vague and whimsical descriptions of twenty different cultivators.

Congratulations, not-ugly but still single for over twenty years Wang Xiaoxue-xianjun. According to our calculations, the twenty people most compatible with your soul in the world are hidden in these twenty cards, awaiting your discovery!

Xue Meng didn't believe a word of it. Back in the Gourd of Debauchery, where he should have seen his bride, all he'd seen was his own face. There was probably no one in the world who would pique his interest—but after only the briefest hesitation, he succumbed to temptation and leafed through the cards.

Sect Leader Xue had named himself Wang Xiaoxue-xianjun, and likewise, his matches hadn't been so bold as to use their real names. The first card Xue Meng drew was a lady who went by the name Dayflower.

The Matching Scroll's description of her followed:

Dayflower-xianzhang, draped in diaphanous silks and glittering with jewels. Subtly alluring and quietly reserved.

Has a high status and many valuable possessions. Experienced in dealing with bad debts and running the family business; dislikes being approached and prefers to stay at home. Dayflower-xianzhang is often inundated with admirers, but remains aloof and ignores them all. A lofty alpine flower—desired by many yet impossible to pluck.

Hobbies: Tending to plants and caring for the sick.

This first card, seen before any of the rest of the stack, shocked Xue Meng to his core. This girl sounded like an absolutely stunning cold beauty! Untouched by the filth of her surroundings, completely independent and not reliant on any man, experienced in homemaking and kind of heart… Most importantly, her hobbies were unnervingly similar to his own mother Madam Wang's! How rare!

As a filial son who idolized his mother, Xue Meng had been convinced since childhood that he could do no wrong by marrying a girl with Madam Wang's temperament. Anyone who knew his mom could see how well she'd taken care of him and his dad.

Xue Meng *was* sorely tempted. But he remained suspicious.

If such an unbelievable catch existed in the cultivation world, how had he never heard of her? He was struck by a faint sense that something was not quite right.

Xue Meng held that sparkling golden card up and read it again. Strangely enough, the more he read it, the more he felt that the description was oddly familiar. But who was it? Why wasn't it coming to mind…

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Xue Mengmeng's Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 2

XUE MENG HAD ONLY been curious about the best-selling Matching Scroll; he hadn't intended to actually make use of it—let alone do as the scroll suggested and meet up with any of the eligible ladies on the cards.

There were likely many others of the same mindset. But as far as Master Ma was concerned, such an attitude was bad for business. Magical devices, you know? They had to be properly used, not just played with. Otherwise, they'd quickly be tossed into a forgotten corner and left to collect dust.

A few days later, a powerful incentive appeared on all the jade scrolls across the realm:

Starting today, everyone actively using the Matching Scroll to find a partner will be automatically added to Taobao Estate's VIP list. In three months' time—regardless of whether you find your match or not—Ma-zhuangzhu will select one of the most active users to receive Taobao Estate's Super-Ultimate Gift Bundle. We invite everyone to participate.

Both the upper and lower cultivation realms went wild over the announcement, which instantly became the hottest topic of conversation.

"The Super-Ultimate Gift Bundle! Did you guys see what's in it?"

Passerby No. 1 liked money best. "Sure did! It's amazing! One hundred eighty books of high-grade techniques, a thousand fine spirit stones, a hundred Taobao Estate coupons, ten classified Taobao Estate device blueprints… It's unbelievable—no wonder he's the model for benevolent business and the second richest merchant in the cultivation world!"

Passerby No. 2 had different ambitions. "He's not just rich, he's also daring on top of it, okay? Some people already have plenty of money, but

now that they've gone and made classified blueprints part of the prize? Obviously people will want to study them!"

Passerby No. 3 had put the most thought into it. "You plebs. I'm nothing like you. I'm not interested in any of these jewels, devices, or blueprints—but I hear there're five hundred single editions of rare erotic books and smutty novels included… Heh heh, they're saying *none* of them have ever been distributed before. If I'm selected, that's the rest of my life handled!"

The others all rolled their eyes. "Pathetic!"

But Master Ma's treasure chest had undeniably hooked almost all the cultivators. Between the greedy, the nerdy, and the horny, there was something there to tempt them all. Master Ma had said it himself: You didn't need to find a partner. All you needed to do was actively use the Matching Scroll. Even if you remained sad and single at the end of the three months, you were still eligible for the draw.

It was a minimal commitment for a high reward—countless cultivators who'd only been playing with the scroll idly made up their minds to go for the prize. Among them was the poor penniless sect leader of Sisheng Peak, darling of the heavens, Xue Ziming.

Xue Meng flipped again through those twenty cards. He'd already read through the introductions and thought they were all decent choices, but the first one, Dayflower, still seemed the best—maybe because he'd seen her first.

"Active use" of the Matching Scroll required meeting one's matches in real life, and a very special first meeting it would be. Master Ma wanted everyone to seek true kindred spirits, meaning physical appearance was an afterthought—and his solution was a simple one. When two people met, they both had to wear one of Taobao Estate's specially designed illusory brocade sachets. This sachet altered the wearer's voice and appearance in the eyes of others. And since both parties knew they were seeing an illusion, they would hopefully try, with greater patience, to get to know one another beyond physical appearances. Only once the pouch was removed would the illusion dissipate. Then, and only then, would they behold each other in truth.

A greedy salesman Master Ma might've been, but he *had* put his heart into his work. For the sake of helping all the poor singletons in the cultivation realm find their one true love, he'd really given it his all.

Thus, Xue Meng made arrangements to meet Miss Dayflower.

His motives were the opposite of pure—he had no real interest in finding a life partner and a great deal of interest in Taobao Estate's gift bundle—but Xue Meng *was* a sect leader after all. As a young boy, he'd been able to shout back at little girls without a second thought, but now that he was the head of his sect, he owed it to his position to conduct himself with the appropriate decorum.

To repeat one of Xuanji's most common reminders: "Sect Leader, your actions and words represent more than just yourself—they represent Sisheng Peak."

To avoid bringing shame down on Sisheng Peak, then, Xue Meng carefully prepared for his date. In truth, this would be his very first time going on a date with a girl; to say he wasn't nervous would be a lie. Sect Leader Xue appeared unruffled and at ease, but he was in fact feeling rather faint. The night before, he'd lain in bed reading Dayflower's card over and over, eyes drawn again and again to the mention of her "high status" and "valuable possessions." This girl had to be loaded.

That doesn't matter, Xue Meng told himself. He may not have been ranked anywhere in the *God-Knows-What Rankings'* wealth category, but he had possession of several mountain peaks after all. His match was just some little girl—could she be richer than him? Could her position be higher than his? Absolutely not.

Right—when they met, he definitely had to take her to the most luxurious restaurant and order the most lavish dishes. He had to outdo her and make *sure* she knew he was the greatest catch in the lower cultivation realm!

Under the mistaken belief he was going to flex his wealth—and dreaming of how Miss Dayflower would look at him with eyes sparkling with admiration and gasp, "Wang Xiaoxue-gege, you're *so* rich!"—a goofy grin appeared on Xue Meng's face. Hugging Longcheng, he blearily fell asleep.

The next day, Xue Meng rose bright and early. He fastened the Taobao Estate brocade sachet to his waist, as required, and flew to the city of Yangzhou to meet his date.

Before he left, he'd made sure to ask Xuanji which was the best restaurant in Yangzhou and looked at the prices in advance. The figures he saw there would hurt his wallet, but for the sake of Sisheng Peak's reputation, it was worth it. Everyone knew you couldn't cower in the face of a rich young lady.

When he sent the message inviting her to meet him at Sunrise Pavilion via the scroll, he'd done so with a haughty smirk on his face. The fanciest restaurant in Yangzhou! Take that! Xue Meng could almost *see* the eligible young maiden waking up in her room and spotting the name of their meeting place as it appeared on the scroll. Her eyes would widen, and her red lips would part as she murmured, voice breathy, "So he really is a man of refined taste…"

While he was still deep in his reverie, the scroll in his hand lit up with one word.

Sure.

…Sure?

That was it?!

Xue Meng nearly toppled off Longcheng in midair. It was one thing if she didn't express overwhelming joy or surprise, but not even a "thank you"? Where was this girl even *from*?! How impolite!

He sat on his sword in a huff. The scroll lit up again as he sailed over the Yangtze River—Dayflower had once again sent a message. *Sunrise Pavilion is quite busy today. If you don't mind a change of plans, we can go somewhere else. I'll make the reservation.*

Xue Meng's dark mood lightened a little.

Oh…this girl was pretty considerate, wasn't she? Happy to treat a guy on the first date—then her earlier curt message was probably just because she wasn't good at expressing herself, like his shizun.

Xue Meng sat up straighter at the thought of Chu Wanning. *That's right*, he thought. He ought to be more forgiving. After all, she was a young lady. Even if she turned out to be rude, he should take it upon himself to be the bigger person.

"I meant it when I said it's my treat," he said. "We don't need to go somewhere else."

After a few minutes, he got his reply.

Sure.

Xue Meng blinked. But he was now accustomed to her tone; he wasn't angry. He kicked his feet on Longcheng, the scimitar slicing through the skies, out of the misty clouds and down toward the waterways of Jiangnan.

Yangzhou appeared on the horizon.

He'd arrived a little early. Xue Meng walked through the bustling streets, idly looking around. Yangzhou was Guyueye's territory. It was filled with thronging crowds and bursts of color, the picture of a prosperous city. Lining the streets were uncles offering pedicure services and aunties selling flowers; the ladies lazily hawked their wares, every word out of their mouths spoken in the familiar cadence of his mom's mellow accent. It brought back happy memories, and Xue Meng grew relaxed. He bought a lollipop from the sugar-painting stall and walked around eating it.

As the meeting time approached, he wandered toward the shores of Shouxi Lake, where Sunrise Pavilion lay. It was indeed very busy, and every guest seemed to be wearing Taobao Estate's illusory brocade sachet. A great many cultivators had decided to participate in Master Ma's prize draw, and apparently, all of them were peacocking by picking the fanciest venue in town.

Speechless, Xue Meng studied the bustle in the main dining hall and turned to the server that came to greet him. "I booked a room upstairs. Under Xu—" He cleared his throat. "Under Wang. Last name Wang." He paused, then awkwardly stated his full name. "Wang Xiaoxue."

The swarm of cultivators who'd come for blind dates must've deadened the server's senses—he didn't even blink at the idiocy of such a name. What was Wang Little Snowflake in comparison to a whole list of

Zhao “Big Dick” Dagens and Du “Belly Button” Jiyans? He led Xue Meng upstairs without comment.

“The Wind Room, sir. As requested, it has a view.”

Xue Meng peered inside. Incredible. These Jiangnan folk were sure something—they called it a room, but the walls were just flimsy bamboo screens. They were finely woven, to be sure, and very well-crafted, allowing one to glimpse the silhouettes of the manicured plants behind them. Beautiful, but also false advertising. Anything above a whisper would be overheard by every guest around them. Well. He couldn’t do anything about it now.

Xue Meng took a seat just as the scroll lit up with another message from Dayflower: *Just finished with an important business client. I’m on my way but I’ll be late.*

Xue Meng stared at those words for a long, long time. Had he perhaps met an expert at blind dates? This was a step too far! She hadn’t even shown up yet and was already flaunting her wealth. Instead of arriving dripping in jewels or bragging about how many buildings she owned, she was out here subtly constructing a high-powered persona—casually dropping that she had important clients visiting early in the morning. She couldn’t have made a starker contrast with Sect Leader Xue, who’d spent the whole morning wandering aimlessly about town.

Xue Meng took a sip of tea.

This woman is sharp. He may have lost this round, but once she showed up, he’d knock her off that high horse and make damn sure she knew that he, Xue Ziming, wasn’t broke!

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Xue Mengmeng's Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 3

BY THE TIME he heard the server say, "This way to the Wind Room," Xue Meng was close to losing his temper.

The woman was finally here.

Xue Meng wiped the displeasure from his face and straightened in his seat. Mimicking his dad's mature and manly aura, he looked in the newcomer's direction.

Unhurried footsteps grew louder on the stairs, and a blurry silhouette came past the half-rolled bamboo hangings. First to emerge was a silver pipe chased with dragons, from which a pale green pouch embroidered with pollia flowers hung. The fingers tapping the body of the pipe were long and slender, fine-boned and beautiful. A tiny cinnabar mole was visible on the side of a pale wrist.

Xue Meng seemed to remember seeing such hands elsewhere, but the memory was hazy as flowers viewed through fog. In another moment, it slipped away from him.

He was still lost in thought when his date stepped into the room.

The Matching Scroll had said: Once equipped, the blind date brocade pouch would cloak the wearer in an illusion. To others, you would look like a combination of yourself and what they thought you should look like. In short, Dayflower definitely looked nothing like this. She looked the way Xue Meng imagined her to look, with just a hint of her actual appearance.

Xue Meng thought this lady cultivator should look a bit like his mother, and so the girl who stepped out from behind the bamboo did indeed resemble Madam Wang. Her skin was very fair, her features elegant yet gentle. Her faintly furrowed brows hinted at a fragile, sickly nature.

It was as if a boulder had struck him in the chest. Xue Meng jolted to his feet—and for good reason. Anyone would startle at the sight of a woman who looked even somewhat like their late, beloved mother; though

Xue Meng knew it was an illusion, it still made his heart pound. He opened his mouth, the word *Mom* on the tip of his tongue.

Thankfully, the server followed her in, bringing Xue Meng crashing back to reality. Stuttering, Xue Meng wrenched that half-formed syllable into *Milady*. “Mi—”

“You’re Wang Xiaoxue?” Dayflower’s voice was cool and crisp. Despite the spell at work, it didn’t sound anything like Madam Wang’s.

“Y-yeah.”

Her bright brown almond eyes assessed him. It was an unsettling experience. For some reason, Xue Meng was certain Dayflower was looking at him with an inherent derision and indolence, mixed with a hint of impatience.

“My memory is poor,” said Dayflower. “I’m apt to call people by the wrong name if I don’t pay attention. I’ll call you Wang-xianzhang, if that suits.”

It was phrased like a question, but it didn’t sound like one at all. Frankly, it was downright imperious. How had he thought this person was like his mom for even a second?

But he was the head of Sisheng Peak after all. Thanks to the Xuanji Elder’s careful training, Xue Ziming was much more tactful than he used to be. Maintaining the aura of a sect leader, he cleared his throat. “Sure. It’s nice to meet you, M—”

Master Ma was an innovative man. He’d set up all sorts of spells on the brocade pouch in the name of making sure nothing would get in the way of his users finding a soulmate. In addition to seeing an illusory version of their match’s face while wearing the pouch, the user could make no attempts to guess at their age, height, physique…or gender. Thus the muting spell triggered before Xue Meng could say the words *Miss Dayflower*.

The message was loud and clear: Age, height, body, looks—even gender—none of that was important in finding your fated other half! Would the assembled cultivators please focus on the soul that lay beneath the skin?!

Xue Meng hadn’t realized how much thought Master Ma had put into this matter. He merely assumed the pouch was defective, so he frowned and picked a different address. “Dayflower-xianzhang.”

“Mn.” Dayflower loftily acknowledged the greeting and sat down across from Xue Meng without further ado.

Xue Meng blinked. *Miss, weren’t you going to bow in greeting, or at least say it’s nice to meet me?*

Miss Dayflower glanced coolly across the table at him and nodded. “Please sit. No need to remain standing.”

Xue Meng’s jaw dropped.

Had he encountered such rudeness in the past, he would certainly have stomped his feet and started yelling—but now he endured the indignity in silence. He was the biggest catch of the lower cultivation world, a sect leader in possession of several mountain peaks, a grown man who was going to brighten Sisheng Peak’s future in his daddy’s name. No sir, he wasn’t going to lose his temper at some little maiden.

Keeping this firmly in mind, Xue Meng retook his seat across from Dayflower. His back was straight as a ruler as he passed her the menu. “What would you like to drink?”

Dayflower seemed uninterested in the question. “Whatever,” she said. “Take your pick.” She leaned back against the red sandalwood official’s chair and added some tobacco to her pipe.

“You smoke?”

“An adjusted prescription.” Dayflower didn’t even look at him. “It has no effect on other people.”

“Hold on, but you’re so young—”

“Who said I was young?”

Xue Meng’s eyes widened. “Then how old are you?”

Dayflower leaned against the window frame. She lit her pipe with a flick of her fingers and took an apathetic drag, then slowly exhaled smoke. “None of your business.”

Xue Meng ground his teeth.

“Also,” said Dayflower with a tilt of her delicate jaw. She gestured at the brocade pouch hanging from Xue Meng’s belt. “That Ma bastard set up a bunch of restriction spells. I couldn’t have answered your question before the pouch was removed, regardless. Relax. I didn’t come see you for the sake of finding a match anyway.”

Xue Meng jolted. Fuck, wasn’t that his line?! Even if neither party was taking this blind date seriously, being the first to say it was a matter of utmost importance—the second would look like a goddamn clown.

He could practically honk his own nose right now. Not only did he feel like a fool, he was now convinced this girl was much more experienced than he was—otherwise, how would she know to beat him to the punch? She must’ve been dragged to a thousand matchmaking dates and been rejected a thousand times for being too much of a prickly snob! That had to be it!

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Xue Meng's handsome face had taken on a distinctly greenish tinge. "Did you think I was here to find a match? To tell you the truth, my own background's nothing to sneeze at—the line of suitors hoping to marry into my family goes from Yangzhou all the way to Sichuan!"

Dayflower eyed him dispassionately.

Before the words left his mouth, Xue Meng had felt like a badass. As he met his date's eyes, he felt like a buffoon.

Dayflower's next words, said in that same unaffected tone, deepened this impression. She took another drag on her pipe and turned to the server lingering at her elbow, who looked positively bored by the proceedings. "The Plum Terrace set for this xianzhang."

Xue Meng's eyes widened. "Didn't I say I'd be ordering?"

"I'm a regular here," Rich Madam Dayflower said, unmoved. "Plum Terrace is sweet, perfect for wet-behind-the-ears juniors like you."

Xue Meng was even angrier now—so mad he wasn't tempted in the least by the tea tray when it came to their table. So what if it looked good? The tea was clear and the cakes were glistening, but he wouldn't touch a bite.

"Aren't you going to have any?" asked Dayflower.

"What's it to you?" huffed Xue Meng. "I love wasting money."

Dayflower's almond eyes slanted him a look, cool through the pale gray smoke of her pipe. "Wang-xianzhang, are you perhaps from Taobao Estate of West Lake?"

"No."

"A wealthy merchant family in Linyi?"

"Nope."

A pause. "A disciple of Guyueye in Yangzhou?"

"Guyueye? Who wants to be from Guyueye?" Xue Meng scoffed. "Forget being a disciple—I wouldn't accept their gifts even if their sect leader Jiang Xi himself came begging on his knees."

For some reason, Dayflower arched an eyebrow.

“What’s with that look?” asked Xue Meng. “Don’t believe me?”

Dayflower sneered in lieu of an answer. She took another puff on her pipe. “If you’re such a big deal, order a few more dishes. I haven’t had breakfast yet.”

Xue Meng was deeply annoyed with this woman already, but he wasn’t about to let a lady starve. He picked up the menu. “What would you like?”

“The Exquisites, Eighteen Ways. I order it every time I come here.”

“Sure, why n—” Xue Meng launched into a fit of coughing. The price next to the listing nearly made his eyes bulge out of their sockets. “Y-you order this every time you come here?!”

“And a pot of Jincheng Spring Dew, with leaves plucked before the Qingming Festival only.”

Blood seemed to boil in Xue Meng’s chest; even a little pat from a cat’s paw right now could have made him spit blood with sufficient velocity to splatter several yards away. If he hadn’t been the one to pick the venue, he’d have suspected this Miss Dayflower of being a Sunrise Pavilion employee in disguise trying to hook him in a honey trap!

The meal left Sect Leader Xue’s heart aching and his wallet half-empty. By the time they left, he was unsteady on his feet.

“Are you feeling unwell?”

Faced with Dayflower’s frowning question, Sect Leader Xue and his damned pride instantly pretended nothing was wrong. “Huh? N-n-no, I feel fine. Great, even.”

“You should see a doctor if you’re sick.”

Xue Meng’s eyes widened. “*You’re* sick! This sect lea—” he coughed, “I’m as healthy as a horse!”

“Is that so?” Every syllable was clipped and clinical, conjuring the astringent scent of medicinal herbs: “Your core is weak, your back is sore, and you struggle with inflammation.” Her almond eyes raked over Xue Meng, making him feel he was being dissected from shin to skullcap. “I’d advise you to seek help.”

Silence.

What on earth had he been thinking? Not all girls who gravitated toward healing were as wonderful as his mom—some were assholes who made your skin crawl just by looking at you!

But the current biggest cause of his discomfort was the Matching Scroll's rules. When two users met, they had to interact for at least six hours. Otherwise, the date didn't count toward their activity. He'd come too far and spent too much to go home empty-handed.

This girl had made her complete disinterest in him clear from the get-go, tragically wounding Xue Meng's pride. Right then, he made up his mind on the following points:

Within the next five hours, he *had* to put on an air of mysterious wealth. Yes, like he was unimpressed by everything fancy and unfazed by anything rare. He'd make sure this condescending little miss regretted every choice she'd made today. At the very least, he'd leave a memorable mark in her history of failed love affairs.

But she hadn't blinked at being taken to Sunrise Pavilion, Yangzhou's finest restaurant. What other venue could he intimidate her with?

After some thought, a name came to mind.

Newly energized, Sect Leader Xue put his nose in the air like a wealthy merchant. "We hardly know each other," he said pompously. "Xianzhang need not worry over my health. We have to spend the rest of the day together, and standing here doing nothing won't do. Why don't I take you somewhere special, broaden your horizons a bit?"

It took Dayflower a beat to reply. "What did you have in mind?"

Xue Meng brought her to the House of Everlasting Night.

The three-story building stood near the port of Yangzhou, the majestic arches of its eaves lined with sculpted creatures. All the locals knew it as a marketplace for stolen goods. The better part of all the shady items in the cultivation world supposedly passed through this glittering building, and the only reason it could stand so proudly in the jianghu was that it was backed by Guyueye.

Once, when the young Xue Meng had planned to visit Jiangnan for fun, Madam Wang had specifically summoned him for a talk. She'd taken his hands and given him a hundred trivial warnings about all sorts of things, but had ended on one memorable note. "Meng-er, the House of Everlasting Night in Yangzhou is bad news. Not only are their wares very expensive, the things they trade in are…rather…"

She couldn't quite bring herself to say it. Her pale cheeks colored, and she cleared her throat. "All that to say, you don't have much in your pockets to begin with. Even if you go in for just a look, you're sure to come out penniless. If you see the House of Everlasting Night, you'd best turn aside and walk past it, got it?"

Xue Meng was a good boy who did everything his mother asked of him. And he was pure of mind, so he'd had no clue what she was hinting at. "Sounds like a place where only rich idiots with too much money for their own good would go!"

Xue Zhengyong had burst out laughing. "Aiya," he said to his son, who had, in fact, already come of age. "Not really. Your mom always thinks of you as her little boy. She's too embarrassed to tell you, but your daddy isn't. There are some things—"

Madam Wang had elbowed him ferociously.

Clutching his ribs, Xue Zhengyong had coughed and changed his tune. "There are some things you don't need to know about just yet!"

Xue Meng had looked at them in confusion, but his parents only smiled at him awkwardly. The poor little guy hadn't been able to make heads or tails of it, but thankfully Shi Mei had come to ask him for help picking herbs for Shizun in the back mountains, so he'd numbly followed him away.

Even so, an impression had formed in Xue Meng's mind that day. If he ever saw the House of Everlasting Night, he was to turn around and walk away. It was full of pointlessly expensive things, and only people with gold coming out their ears would patronize it.

To recover some of his lost dignity—and because he thought, as a sect leader, it was high time he broadened his own horizons—he led Miss Dayflower to this splendid gold-and-red building. Along the way,

Dayflower asked him over and over again if he really was set on going to the House of Everlasting Night; to keep his composure from cracking, Xue Meng waved his hand and pushed out his chin, looking uncannily like a peacock fanning its tail feathers.

“You’re a regular at Sunrise Pavilion, and I’m a top client at the House of Everlasting Night. Of course I’ll take you there.”

Dayflower’s expression went a bit strange.

Several minutes later, Xue Meng stood in front of the old manager at the House of Everlasting Night, red from his ankles to the roots of his hair and as stiff as if he’d been struck by lightning.

“Wh-what do you mean, a VIP pendant? M-my mom never mentioned that; she said you could go in whenever you wished!”

The manager eyed him sidelong. “Your mom hasn’t been to Yangzhou in over a decade, has she? The House of Everlasting Night changed its rules a long time ago—only masters and mistresses with VIP pendants may enter to trade. If you don’t have one, I’m afraid I’ll have to insist you leave.”

“I-I-I—” Xue Meng wanted to find a piece of tofu and smack himself to death. He’d already boasted about being a regular. Admitting he didn’t have such a pendant would be the biggest pratfall, wouldn’t it? He stuttered for an age before retorting, red and huffy. “I forgot! I remember now! Yes indeed!”

The manager kept his hands tucked in his sleeves. The old man had seen his share of humanity in this role, and Xue Meng’s transparent excuse only amused him. This boy was far too naïve and simpleminded.

“B-b-b-b-but I left the house in a rush today, so I forgot it at home!”

“Aiyo, how unfortunate. Please come again when you remember it.”

As Xue Meng glared at the condescending old man, caught between awkwardness and pitiful helplessness, a hand reached out beside him. Around that slender, porcelain wrist hung a pendant that gleamed like jade, adorned with golden beads.

“I brought mine.”

The manager flinched at the sight of the pendant. A parade of expressions, beginning with shock and horror and moving into solicitous flattery, threatened to smooth out the many wrinkles on his face. “H-H-Heaven-Tier VIP?”

“Hurry up,” said Dayflower coolly.

“R-r-right away!”

The heavy sandalwood doors, covered in intricate carvings, swung outward. The manager bowed after them, coming just shy of falling to his knees in apology to Her Majesty Miss Dayflower. The lady in question waved her pale green sleeves and turned, aloof, to the stupefied Xue Meng.

“Wang-xianzhang,” she said scornfully. “With all your experience, why don’t you lead the way?”

Xue Meng could only gape.

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Xue Mengmeng's Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 4

XUE MENG WAS DEAD set on sticking to his story. "Sure I will!"

But all his confidence flew out the window as soon as they strode through the doors.

What the hell kind of place was this?! Were they all out of their minds?!

Those maidservants—what kind of clothes were they wearing?! Why were some of them dressed like nine-tailed fox demons? He couldn't bear to look—all that skin—their chests, legs, and waists—on brazen display! Wasn't Jiang Yechen the big boss in Yangzhou? That rotten sleazeball! How dare he allow such a shady, disreputable business to set up shop so conspicuously in the middle of the city?!

Dayflower seemed to sense his discomfort. "If Wang-xianzhang is unused to it," she said with a faint smile, "we can go elsewhere. No need to force yourself to stay."

"Wh-who said I was forcing myself? Have you ever heard of the *God-Knows-What Rankings*?"

"It rings a bell."

The words left Xue Meng's mouth before he could stop himself: "I-I-I-I placed first on the debauchery list!"

"Wasn't that Mei Hanxue?"

"That's 'cause I'm not a showoff, so I had them remove me!"

"You can get names removed?" Dayflower scoffed. "How much did it cost you?"

"None of your business." Rolling his eyes, Xue Meng marched ahead—though the tips of his ears were red, and his arms and legs swung in tandem for the first few steps.

The establishment boasted three towering floors, but Xue Meng summarized them all in one phrase: weirdly dressed assholes selling freaky shit. It wasn't just the ladies, dressed in hardly more than a thought—that was bearable if he kept his eyes averted and his head all the way down. But he hardly recognized a thing these women were selling. The shouts that rang out in this black market as the shopkeepers hawked their wares were beyond his comprehension. Sect Leader Xue understood all the words individually, but when they were put together…

"Haitang Stories, the Curated Edition—featuring tales of lovely ladies and tender young men enjoying ninefold temptations and two dragons in one cave. Full of spicy scenes, completely unmissable! Every copy features the author Plum Blossoms Bloom Together's own handwritten signature!"

"Mister Big, Mister Big, let's all do a daikon jig! Our Mister Bigs have been enchanted with our proprietary spells to expand to the size of any cultivator listed on the Size Ranking of the Cultivation World. Want to experience the same thrill as Chu-zongshi? Find out what it's like to take both Kunlun twins at the same time? All you need is one Mister Big—a pleasure you'll never forget!"

Listen to that! What on *earth* was going on?

Despite his acute distress, Xue Meng still had to put on an unflappable act. When he snuck a look at Dayflower and realized she was watching him with a mocking glint in her eyes, Xue Meng couldn't stand it. He swaggered right up to the stall as if he were a frequent patron.

"I'll take ten of these daikon spirits."

Both the stallkeeper and Miss Dayflower were at a loss for words.

Xue Meng's almond eyes narrowed. "What?" He rubbed his nose. "Do I have something on my face?"

It took the shopkeeper a long moment to put the words together. "Begging your pardon. Um, our Mister Bigs are designed to mimic the entire top ten on the Young Heroes Ranking. Once unsealed, I assure you they're quite powerful and *just* like the real thing. You look very young—if you haven't reached the insatiable appetites of middle age, I think one will suffice."

Xue Meng was totally out of his depth. He looked down at the daikon radishes lying round and chubby in their brocade boxes, baffled as to what use these Mister Bigs could possibly have once unsealed. What was this nonsense about Size Ranking? What “insatiable appetites” was this man referring to?

Having the humility to ask questions when one didn’t understand something was an admirable quality. It was only a pity Xue Meng didn’t possess it. He thought the best men were independent thinkers, so he thought about it independently and pieced it together. These Mister Bigs must be like century-old ginseng—extremely potent when unsealed. Middle age was when lots of cultivators reached a plateau in their cultivation, so they’d have an insatiable need to supplement their training with spiritual ginseng. These Mister Bigs were powerful, so one was enough for most people to break through the blockages in their meridians.

It all made sense now!

Inwardly, Xue Meng loudly and raucously cheered for his own intellect. He turned to the shopkeeper, all arrogance. “How could I be satisfied with just one?”

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The man was stunned. “You…*can* take two at once, but you shouldn’t select any from the top three. I may be selling on the black market, but I’m not black of heart. Please, I must make this clear to you.”

“You…!” Xue Meng was losing his patience. “Just sell me what I asked for!”

“Y-you’re asking for too much.” The shopkeeper mopped his forehead. “You won’t be able to take it.”

A haughty snort. “As if I haven’t done this before. Forget two at once—I can go through twenty in a matter of days.”

The shopkeeper fell silent. He looked with respectful awe at Xue Meng’s pale and thin lips, then flicked his eyes down to Xue Meng’s…

“What are you looking at?” Noticing the direction of his gaze, Xue Meng glared back. “Do your job! Don’t ogle people!”

The shopkeeper hastily raised his eyes and cleared his throat. “Th-this one is im—impressed by your talents, honored customer. I-I’ll just go package up ten of these radish spirits for you. All in Mo-zongshi’s size, was it?”

Xue Meng goggled. *What do you mean, Mo-zongshi’s size?* What did this have to do with that dumbass Mo Ran? He pondered the question. Aided by his extraordinary powers of deduction, he once again thought through it. Was it referring to how much spiritual energy Mo Ran could handle? Well, Xue Meng wasn’t going to take that one lying down—when it came to spiritual energy capacity among the younger cultivators, he was a close second to Mo Ran. Scowling, Xue Meng said, “No. I want Sect Leader Xue’s size.”

The shopkeeper was flabbergasted. “Please, you must be joking? Since when did Sect Leader Xue rank in the top ten xianjun?”

Xue Meng’s flabber was even more gasted. His temper erupted. “Xue Ziming didn’t place?!”

The man didn’t understand how they’d arrived here. “Why Xue Ziming?”

Veins were pulsing in Xue Meng’s forehead. “Why *not* Xue Ziming?!”

These two squawked at each other like chickens, entirely overlooking the spectator Dayflower's deepening frown. Her limpid eyes swept over Xue Meng again and again. She stepped up and grabbed him by the arm.

Xue Meng whirled. "Men and women should keep their distance! Why are you grabbing me?!"

"Do you know what these radish spirits are used for?"

"Nonsense! They supplement your cultivation, like ginseng!"

Both Dayflower and the shopkeeper froze.

Dayflower turned back to the shopkeeper. "I'll unseal one of these spirits. Put it on Guyueye's account."

She pointed, and the sealing talismans popped off one of the brocade boxes. The quiescent radish spirit pulsed with a dazzling glow. Before their eyes, it turned into a…shockingly lifelike…certainly realistic…huge and throbbing…jade dildo. The kind that could thrust on its own.

After a choked moment, Xue Meng turned an alarming shade of green. He jabbed a finger at the shopkeeper. "Y-y-y-you—" he yelled, narrowly avoiding biting his own tongue. "You *pervert*!"

The poor man was baffled. "You're the one who wanted them, you even said one wasn't enough to satisfy—"

"*Aaah!*" Xue Meng wanted to erase those words from his memory. The green of his face gave way to a furious crimson, the two colors warring until at last he clutched his head and tried to flee—only to ram right into a sturdy torso.

Dayflower stood in his way. But…why did her body feel nothing like a girl's?

She eyed him icily. "Xue Meng?"

Xue Meng jolted. "How did you know? Who are you?!"

Dayflower grabbed him by the collar and hauled him out of the House of Everlasting Night without another word, ignoring his yowling protests. Xue Meng found himself marched all the way to a quiet riverside pavilion, whereupon Dayflower flung him aside and turned from him with a wave of her sleeves. Her grip on his collar had nearly choked Xue Meng to

death. Clutching his neck, he descended into a flurry of coughing. “You dickhead! Wh-wh-who—who *are* you?!”

Dayflower raised a slender hand. Jade light flashed past her fingertips, and before Xue Meng had realized what was happening, the Taobao Estate illusory sachets hanging from their waists disintegrated.

Xue Meng’s head snapped up so quickly he only narrowly avoided bashing his brains out on one of the pavilion pillars. “*You?!*”

The figure before him was tall and handsome, bedecked in lavish silver and green robes that swept the ground. Worked upon the fabric were the phoenix patterns of Guyueye, subtly embroidered with the most precious peacock-silk thread. But all the splendid extravagance of his outfit was outdone by the presence of the wearer himself. His features were finely shaped, his lips tapering to a beautiful curve; his almond eyes brought to mind veils of smoky rain and shone with an inborn hauteur.

“Jiang Yechen?!”

Who else could this Dayflower-xianjun be but the sect leader of Guyueye and wealthiest man in all the cultivation world?

Madam Jiang…er, correction—Jiang Yechen’s next words shook Xue Meng to the core. “You are *such* a disappointment.”

Xue Meng gaped. If not for the fact he’d been throttled to within an inch of his life a moment ago, he really might have beaten this man to death. Jiang Xi’s complexion was smooth and clear, so how could he stand there and spout such thick-skinned nonsense without batting an eye?!

“As the leader of a whole sect, how dare you squander your time doing *this* instead of bettering yourself? Absurd!”

By this point, the shock had worn off. Xue Meng coughed again and let his hand fall from his throat, glaring at Jiang Xi. “*You’re* scolding *me*? Aren’t you doing the same thing?!”

“You’re young,” snapped Jiang Xi. “Instead of getting to know lady cultivators from respectable families the proper way, you let that snake oil salesman Ma Fangzhi take you for a ride. What appropriate relationship could come from this? How foolish can you be?!”

Xue Meng was equally enraged. “Why don’t you look in the mirror? You’re not getting any younger, and back then with my mom… What gives *you* the right to go out and waste young people’s time instead of staying put where you should be, minding Guyueye’s business? Just because you don’t look old? Maybe you should’ve considered that your date might be younger than your son! Not that I’m saying I’m your son—obviously—I’m just saying you’re ridiculous!”

Jiang Xi’s rage knew no bounds. He snapped his sleeves again and clenched his jaw. “I was *not* trying to date anyone.”

“Then what were you doing? Oh, I know, you wanted to study your competitor Ma-zhuangzhu’s devices, is that it? And you call him a snake oil salesman? What about your House of Everlasting Night! Where’s your sense of shame?!”

“Where’s yours? A grown man picking a name like Little Snowflake—don’t you have a shred of dignity?”

“Still none of your business!”

“You’re impudent!”

“You’re poo!”

“Xue Meng!”

“Jiang Xi!”

“*Wang Xiaoxue!*”

“*Jiang Dayflower!*”

An elderly couple leading their ox cart past the pavilion glanced at the bickering pair. “Dear, what’re those two young lovebirds arguing about in there?” asked the woman.

“Honey,” said the man. “Your eyes are going. They’re brothers.”

“Huh? Isn’t that one in green and silver a girl?”

“He’s a man, just a pretty one. Look, he’s much taller than his little brother.”

Both Xue Meng and Jiang Xi were rendered totally speechless.

Xue Meng stamped his foot. “Look at you, so fresh-faced at your advanced age! All you do is take advantage of people!”

Jiang Xi sneered. “This is always how it’s been in the medicinal sect. Come join Guyueye if it bothers you so much.”

“*I never want to see you again!*” Xue Meng howled furiously. “That old lady was right to call you a girl! I went by the name Wang Xiaoxue because the Matching Scroll made a mistake, but you totally chose Dayflower to make you sound like a woman!”

“I chose it because—”

“Because what?”

Because I love the sight of pollia flowers in full bloom.

But when he remembered these had been Wang Chuqing’s favorite flower as well, he pursed his lips and fell silent to avoid another misunderstanding.

“See? You *were* trying to pretend, and you won’t even own up to it!”

Jiang Xi jabbed a finger in Xue Meng’s face, ready to teach this whelp a memorable lesson on the appropriate way to talk to one’s seniors—but as the words lay upon his tongue, he realized arguing with this idiot on the banks of the river was beneath him. He slashed his hand downward in a huff.

The pain in his chest had returned. Jiang Xi turned away and coughed violently, covering his face with his sleeve.

At first, Xue Meng thought he’d choked on his own spittle and privately gloated at the sight of his suffering. Yet as the coughing worsened and those misty almond eyes glittered with tears, he grew concerned. “Hey…what’s wrong?”

The rims of Jiang Xi’s eyes had reddened from the force of the fit. He lifted his pipe, fingers shaking, and took a few vicious drags.

“Smoking? When you can hardly breathe?” yelped Xue Meng.

Jiang Xi ignored him. Somehow, after a few puffs on the pipe, his condition seemed to improve. He panted for breath and slowly straightened,

then drifted to the side of the pavilion to stare at the rushing water outside. “Get the hell back to Sisheng Peak.”

“Your injuries from the battle—”

“There’s no ailment that I, Jiang Yechen, cannot cure. This is no concern of yours whatsoever.”

Xue Meng’s tentative overture of care was once again smacked down by Jiang Xi. He stood there, caught between offering comfort and criticism, his entire face pinched with the effort.

After a few more drags on his pipe, Jiang Xi raised his head and slowly exhaled the smoke. “Also, you’re not a child anymore. It’s high time you found someone appropriate and started a family. Don’t waste your time with cheap, low-effort blind dates—if you’re to choose a wife, you must know everything about her, from her temperament to her family, her cultivation, and her looks. You can’t be lax about any of the above.” He paused, frowning. “It is *not* something Ma Fangzhi’s Matching Scroll can do for you.”

Xue Meng’s eyes widened. “Jiang Yechen, are you kidding me? *You’re* the one who said love is a disease. I’d understand if it were anyone else telling me to hurry up and get married, but what’s *your* problem?”

Jiang Yechen turned aside indifferently. “Love is indeed a disease, but that only applies to me.” A pause. “Not in your case. For you, childlessness is a disease. You need to get married.”

Xue Meng’s jaw dropped again. He’d never been more grateful that his dad was Xue Zhengyong and not Jiang Yechen—who in the world had double standards as ridiculous as Jiang Xi’s? This piece of work cut ties whenever it suited him, but here *he* was being rushed to the altar? Jiang Yechen really was a scumbag!

When Xue Meng returned to Sisheng Peak, he furiously crossed out Dayflower’s card and ripped it into little pieces. The less Jiang Xi wanted him to use the Matching Scroll, the more he damn well would! He’d *never* let that honorable businessman Master Ma’s gift basket end up in the hands of the evil salesman Jiang Xi!

Passionate flames erupted in Xue Meng’s heart. He spread out the cards once again and studied the remaining candidates. He’d learned his

lesson. Now that he knew the Matching Scroll might give him men, he made up his mind to go through each card carefully. At the very least, he had to choose a girl his own age this time. Xue Ziming was *not* going down without a fight!

After careful analysis, the card the brave fighter Xue Ziming selected belonged to someone who went by Miss Treated and described themselves as a "neglected consort." The Matching Scroll might allow for a mix of genders, but would a *man* call himself a neglected consort? This was surely a pitiful little maiden.

The description of Miss Treated was as follows:

Miss Treated. Strange in temperament but straightforward by nature. Can be erratic and unpredictable. Possesses a formidable weapon.

Having been neglected by their one true love and abandoned to the darkness of long and lonely nights for over a decade, Miss Treated-xianzhang is extraordinarily obsessed with and fixated on having and showing affection. Is unhealthy about it to the point of frequent suspicion and self-doubt. Perhaps only the gentlest and most indulgent partner could heal Miss Treated's scars and ignite the fires of love in this forsaken heart.

Hobbies: Heart-pounding romps.

It had to be said that Xue Meng had a naturally kind heart. Any normal person would have stayed far away from a potential date like that, but Xue Meng chose her on purpose. And not just because she was *definitely* a girl. Xue Meng picked her because the words on the card truly moved him: left alone, obsessive and affection-starved, full of self-doubt *and* with a scarred heart. The poor thing! The man who'd abandoned her must be cold and shameless, a real Jiang Xi No. 2! A right scumbag of the cultivation world!

Anyway, he wasn't *actually* trying to date her. But this girl's situation was so tragic that it was almost inevitable that no one would choose her, and then her heart would be further wounded. She'd sink into deeper anxiety and turmoil.

What a heartbreaking story. She liked "heart-pounding romps," so she was definitely a bit impulsive. What if, in her despair, she became mad enough to hurt herself? Xue Meng wouldn't let it happen on his watch. All

of Xue Zhengyong's teachings echoed in his ears. *Feel the pain of others. The world has too much strife—ease it where you can.*

Thus Xue Meng, whose heart was just as full of righteousness and compassion as his daddy's, made an admirable choice. Yes! He would bring warmth to Miss Treated!

Actions spoke louder than words. Xue Meng immediately messaged Miss Treated through the scroll and asked to meet in three days' time, with the illusory sachets on. They would rendezvous in Wuchang Town, Sichuan.

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Xue Mengmeng's Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 5

SOON ENOUGH, it was the day of his date with Miss Treated. This time, Xue Meng came ready to make a friend and benevolently mentor a heartbroken young woman. He wasn't trying to one-up her on anything, so the venue he chose, and his overall attitude, were night and day from his date with Day—*tsk!* That lying piece of crap Jiang Xi.

Wuchang Town was Xue Meng's own backyard. He knew where to find the best food and drink, at the best prices, without even bothering to look. He chose a casual place he often patronized himself. Their stir-fries and gudong pot offerings were by far the best in town, but the spot was at an inn a little out of the way and might be hard to find if one didn't know where to look. He stepped into a private booth and was just about to message Miss Treated directions when he heard a slightly husky but nonetheless rich and melodious voice. "Hey," the woman said. "Shopkeep, I'm looking for someone named Wang Xiaoxue."

"Wang Xiaoxue?"

The lady sounded impatient. "A customer."

Xue Meng lifted the half-rolled curtain of the booth and peered out.

Beside the bar stood a tall and slender female cultivator who looked to be in her late twenties. She was stunning—her ink-dark tresses tumbled around her shoulders, and her eyes, so dark they gleamed purple, were framed by long, smoky lashes. Her fitted cultivator's robes, black edged in gold, showed to best advantage the taper of her waist and the length of her legs. Her aura was impossible to miss: She had an air of command, yet there was a certain wildness in her gaze.

The illusory brocade sachet had recast her voice and looks, but it was clear Miss Treated was tall and exceedingly beautiful.

Spotting Xue Meng, Miss Treated cast him a sideways glance and strode over. "So you're the one who asked to meet me."

“I am.”

“Good. You have great taste.” She proceeded to sit down across from Xue Meng, arms folded—every line of her body boasting of her strength and power.

Based on the card’s description, Xue Meng had expected a weeping mess of a girl, dripping with sorrow and resentment. He was shocked by her unapologetic boldness. On the other hand, Xue Meng wasn’t much good at consoling sobbing women. Miss Treated’s unshakable resolve, despite her history of heartbreak, instantly raised her in his esteem.

Unfortunately, Xue Meng wasn’t much good at giving compliments either. The number of people he’d praised in his entire life could be counted on one hand. Three fingers, to be specific—his dad, his mom, and his shizun. It took him a veritable age to form a few awkward syllables. “Um… it must be very hard.” *For you* went unsaid.

Miss Treated had been staring out the window since she sat down. At this, she fixed those purple eyes on Xue Meng like a falcon sighting a rabbit. “You can tell?” she asked, after a considerable pause.

You’re still strutting around like a queen after getting ditched, thought Xue Meng. *Only an idiot wouldn’t notice such mental fortitude.* He nodded.

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Miss Treated rubbed her nose and smirked in a strangely threatening way. “True enough. It’s always either that, status, or riches with you lot.” Slouching back, she braced her hands on the chair and tilted her chin in Xue Meng’s direction. “Go ahead and order.”

She spoke with unquestionable authority. Coming out of her mouth, those four words somehow sounded like an imperial decree—unnerving Xue Meng but also ticking him off. He glared at her.

“Whatcha lookin’ at?” Miss Treated’s eyes were coolly indifferent, yet even like this they held a faint allure. Crossing one leg over the other, she loosened her too-tight collars with one fair-skinned finger. “Wanna fuck?”

Xue Meng jolted. “Wh-wh-wh-wh-what?!”

The poor downtrodden maiden Miss Treated launched a second psychological volley at the sweet wholesome boy Xue Meng: “I said, what are you looking at? Do you want to fuck?”

Xue Meng couldn’t breathe. His cheeks went red, then white, then red again; he jerked his chin up indignantly. “Y-y-you—aren’t you ashamed?! Y-y-y-you’d best watch your mouth!”

Miss Treated arched a brow and looked at him with a twist of her pale lips that dimpled her cheeks. “Isn’t that why you asked to meet? Matching Scroll, they say—one tumble in the sheets is a match for the greatest sorrow.”

“Wh-wh-wh-what are you saying?!” Xue Meng twitched and nearly leapt to his feet. Under normal circumstances, anyone who said such things to Sect Leader Xue would’ve been cut to ribbons by Longcheng—but Xue Meng knew Miss Treated’s painful history and was aware of her high-strung tendencies. Reminding himself of his goal to set this poor maiden to rights, Xue Meng took a breath and managed to keep from drawing his scimitar.

Even then, he was so mad his nostrils were flaring. “How can you speak like that? Tha—that wasn’t my intention at all!”

“Oh? Is that so?”

Miss Treated looked much more invested in the proceedings now. Uncrossing her legs, she finally sat up straight. “Good to know. Then we’re on the same page here. To be honest, I’ve washed my dick of that whole business and turned over a new bedsheet—I wouldn’t fuck you even if you asked.”

Xue Meng pressed his hands over his ears, so distressed he didn’t realize his date had used such inventive language that even the Matching Scroll hadn’t been able to parse it, thus revealing his gender. “Aaaah! Will you *please* stop with the obscenity?!”

“Tsk. You know, when you act all dumb and flustered like this, you remind me of someone. Fine. I won’t say it if you don’t want me to, but you have to do me a favor.”

Xue Meng looked up, unaccountably anxious. This woman was terrifying. “What kind of favor?”

“Date me,” said Miss Treated.

Xue Meng nearly flipped the table. “Didn’t you say you weren’t looking to date?!”

“Why’re you getting your panties in a twist? Let me finish.” Miss Treated rolled her eyes. “I don’t mean for real. I want you to *pretend* to date me.”

“Why?”

A vicious glint shone in Miss Treated’s eyes. She slapped her hand down on the table and leaned forward, voice low. “I want to make someone jealous.”

“Who?”

“My real lover.”

Xue Meng boggled.

So, this young woman had been abandoned for so many years, to the point of driving herself insane with doubt and anxiety, and she was *still* hung up on some cultivation world loser? Instead of making a clean break, it seemed the two were still involved—and here she was, going to the effort of finding a fake boyfriend to make her real boyfriend jealous. Did this Miss Treated not have a working brain after all?

“Is that a no?” she asked.

Xue Meng took a moment to compose himself.

“I’ll be honest,” she said. “I’ve met up with quite a few people through this Matching Scroll. Either they ran away as soon as they heard me out, or they were sneakily hoping to actually score.” Noting Xue Meng’s continued silence, she continued, “It’s fine if you’re not interested. We can end things here. I’ll think of something else.”

What else? Heart-pounding self-harm? Xue Meng felt a headache coming on. He kneaded at his temples, then waved his hands and pushed the menu forward. “Sure, I’ll do it. My dad told me saving one life is worth a whole pagoda of merits. I’ll help you out, okay?”

Miss Treated’s eyes lit up. “Really?”

“A gentleman’s word is as good as gold—if I say I will, then I will. As long as it helps cheer you up.” Xue Meng sighed. “Should we talk as we eat? Take a look—my treat.”

Miss Treated raised a hand. “Don’t bother.”

Just as Xue Meng was starting to wonder if her bright idea was to skip dinner and sleep instead, she snapped her fingers. “Shopkeep, all your priciest dishes for this venerable—um, for me!”

This time, it wasn’t just his nostrils that flared—Xue Meng’s jaw dropped and his eyes widened. Where’d this bandit queen come from?! Was this girl *completely* uncivilized? Who ordered food like that?!

“You!” shrieked Xue Meng. “Don’t you know how shameful it is to waste food?”

“The ol’ ball and chain says the same thing.” Miss Treated narrowed her eyes. “So I’m going to waste the hell out of food today, and you better keep your mouth shut about it. Otherwise I’ll order *everything* on their menu—everything in this inn.”

Miss Treated’s attitude shocked Xue Meng to the core. “Are you from Taobao Estate, by any chance?”

“No.”

“A rich Linyi merchant?”

“Nope.”

“…Guyueye of Yangzhou?”

Miss Treated snorted. “Guyueye? Who the hell do they think they are? Not even fit to hold my shoes.”

Xue Meng blinked. Why did this feel so familiar?

The hot dishes and the gudong pot would take some time, but the appetizers arrived soon enough. Xue Meng glanced at the plate of tripe marinated with chili peppers and had a realization. “You said you’re from Lin’an, didn’t you? Can you handle spice?”

“Why not?” said Miss Treated, snatching her chopsticks. “I love spice.” She grabbed a few slices of tripe and shoved them straight into her mouth. “That’s the stuff. I’ve been craving this for *so* long.”

“If you like it so much,” asked Xue Meng, “what’s stopping you from eating it normally?”

“My lover can’t handle anything spicy.”

“Huh? He doesn’t let you eat spicy food just because *he* doesn’t like it?!” Spice aficionado Xue Meng was immediately indignant. “What a disgrace! At least get a twin pot!”

“It’s not that he won’t let me have it. It’s that *I* won’t let me have it.”

Xue Meng’s eyes widened. “What?”

Miss Treated seemed to want to explain the situation, but then realized it would be a very long story. She pursed her lips, unhappy. “It’s ’cause I’m a goddamn piece of work.”

There it was. The self-doubt and anxiety the Matching Scroll had mentioned.

“Enough.” Miss Treated changed the subject. “Let’s talk about how you’re going to pretend to be my fake lover to piss off my real lover.”

“Sure…” Xue Meng replied. “But why are you trying to piss him off?”

Miss Treated scoffed, features twisting as she gnashed her teeth. “Because he lost the pouch I gave him!”

Didn't he neglect you for years? wondered Xue Meng. *What's losing a pouch in comparison? You should be used to that…*

But Miss Treated was still talking; Xue Meng couldn't get a word in edgewise. "I gave it to him for the Qixi Festival this year!" she cried.

That's still not as bad as him ignoring you…

"I've never given anyone a present like that!" Miss Treated continued, voice rising in anger. "He doesn't like any jewels or treasures, he has no interest in armor diagrams, so I did my best to make him a pouch with my own two hands—only for this ungrateful brute to treat it like dirt!"

Oh…that did sound pretty bad.

Miss Treated pressed her lips into a tight line, enraged and embarrassed. She seemed to be struggling, unsure if she should continue. Just as Xue Meng thought she had given up, she slammed her hand on the table and burst out with "It'd be one thing if he just lost mine, but he still fucking wears the one someone else gave him! What the hell does he mean by that? Is he trying to rub it in my face?!"

Xue Meng blinked. "He received another brocade pouch? I-is he with someone else?"

"Why else would I try to make him jealous?" Miss Treated snarled. "I want him to know the number of admirers this ven—um, I have, is in the thousands! If he doesn't cherish me like I deserve, other people are going to be lining up for me. I don't need him at all. If he doesn't make it up to me, I'll disappear! He and that hoity-toity slut can live happily ever after!"

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Xue Mengmeng's Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 6

XUE MENG POSSESSED morals as strong as his shizun's, so this outburst put him into a towering fury on Miss Treated's behalf. Words like *heartless scoundrel*, *faithless cheat*, *two-timing traitor,* and *lying scumbag* poured into his head like a tide. "That's seriously going too far!"

Realizing Miss Treated had threatened to disappear, Xue Meng's heart pounded. So this girl *did* have passionately self-destructive tendencies. He had to keep her from hurting herself!

"Leave it to me," said Xue Meng, incensed. "I *hate* disloyal cheaters like that. Lay it all on me, don't worry—I'll make it look so real he spits blood and regrets all the ways he's ever wronged you!" He paused, then continued seriously: "But as they say, you have to know yourself and know your enemy before you can secure victory. Tell me everything that happened between the two of you so I know what to do!"

Miss Treated frowned. "There are a lot of things that are too hard to talk about."

"Oh." Faced with a damsel in distress, Xue Meng—for once—was tactful. "Then why don't I ask the questions? We can skip anything you don't want to discuss."

Miss Treated thought about it. "Okay," she said with a nod. "Let's do it that way."

Their gudong pot and stir-fry had arrived, filling the scene with fragrant scents and glistening colors.

"Let's start with that man of yours. How long have you known each other? What happened?"

Miss Treated picked up some crisp kidney slices fried in garlic. After a few bites, she set down her chopsticks and looked at Xue Meng. "I'll be honest—our story's a little scary. You sure you want to hear it?"

“Nothing’s going to be scarier to me than my own parentage,” said Xue Meng. “Go ahead.”

But at this, Miss Treated’s ears pricked up. She drew closer, eyes shining. “Oh? Is that so? And who *are* your parents?”

“Do you want my help or not?”

Miss Treated reined in her curiosity. “Fine,” she said, clearing her throat. “I’ll start.” The first words out of her mouth were shocking indeed. “My lover was once my shizun.”

Xue Meng was abruptly reminded of a suboptimal time in his life. He took a sip of his tea to soothe his nerves, but her next words were even more shocking.

“We got married a long time ago.”

The teacup rattled in his hand, but he maintained his composure—until her third sentence. “We have sex every day, and did even before we got married. We only went at it harder after the wedding—sometimes all day and all night.”

With a hacking cough, Xue Meng spat out his tea. The Matching Scroll had called Miss Treated straightforward, but Xue Meng hadn’t realized a girl could be *this* straightforward.

And she wasn’t done yet. She was still going, as if she wouldn’t quit until he fainted from shock. “He’s not great in bed; I’m the only one who wouldn’t be turned off by him. But I’m damn good in bed, a sex god packing an absolute unit, so he slowly started to want more. He’d say no while going three or four rounds with me in a night; sometimes we’d do it seven or eight times. In bed, in the courtyard, in the gardens, in the hot springs…”

“Halt!” Xue Meng finally caught his breath. Steam was coming out of his ears; he mopped up the tea he’d choked on, face scarlet. “I don’t need all the details. You two are fine in that department and that’s all I need to know.”

“Sure. We’re fine in that department, going three or four times every night, sometimes even eight. Normal people couldn’t handle it but I can—in bed, in the courtyard, in the gardens, in the hot springs…”

Xue Meng mopped harder.

“For fuck’s sake.” Suddenly irate, Miss Treated struck the table, sending the cups clattering. “If not for the fact we couldn’t have a kid together, we’d have a whole house full of them! What room would there be for that asshole then?”

Xue Meng blinked. So Miss Treated was infertile. That must be what had given that conniving shrew a chance to take her place. Xue Meng’s mom had also been unable to bear another child, but Xue Zhengyong had never looked down on her because of it. They’d loved each other just the same, for all of their lives. If only there were more men like his dad out there, there’d be many fewer broken hearts and miserable partings.

When Xue Meng considered the story in that light, he was even more sympathetic toward this girl and even angrier on her behalf. “Have you tried any healing brews or seen a doctor? Jiang Yechen of Guyueye might be an ass, but he’s good at what he does. You could—”

“Hmph, sure I have! Ask anyone and they’ll say it’s impossible, but I choose my own fate—not the heavens, and certainly not anyone else. If I want a kid with him, nothing’s going to stop me. I went and asked Jiang Yechen for a prescription, but that asshole pretty boy dug in his heels and wouldn’t give it to me no matter what I said. Seriously, that guy doesn’t know what’s good for him!”

Xue Meng blinked. It was true Jiang Xi didn’t know what was good for him, but begging your pardon, since when was he pretty? In what world could the words “pretty boy” be applied to him?

But aside from that detail—why did this story ring a bell? Xue Meng couldn’t figure it out, so he stopped trying. “That bastard Jiang Yechen has always been a callous miser. He’s a damn evil salesman who doesn’t understand a thing about other people’s struggles. Don’t waste your time on him. What happened afterward? Who’s this homewrecker trying to steal your man? You and your shizun…” He coughed awkwardly. “Seem to do fine in the bedroom, so he must like you well enough. What changed?”

Things would have gone better if he hadn’t mentioned the competition. Now that he had, Miss Treated was furious again. “I was out of the picture for a while, so that hussy saw a chance and swooped in!”

Xue Meng hummed in comprehension, eyes widening. “So the homewrecker came in during the years this guy was neglecting you?”

Miss Treated gnashed her teeth. “Exactly.”

How awful! Ditching his faithful lover for a new flame! Xue Meng smacked his hand on the table and pushed to his feet. “How the hell is he Jiang Yechen No. 2?! He’s just as bad as Jiang Yechen himself!”

Miss Treated cocked her head and rapped her knuckles on the table. “You seem to know Jiang Yechen very well. Who is he to you?”

Xue Meng sat back down awkwardly and poured himself a fresh cup of tea. “I’m his old man.”

Miss Treated eyed him skeptically.

“Aiya, I don’t know why I said that. He’s nothing to me; I’m just using him as an example. Everyone knows he’s the scum of the cultivation world, and awful to women.” Xue Meng punctuated this last statement with a loud scoff.

Miss Treated widened her purple-black eyes. “Really? All I know is he hates anything to do with romance. Apparently a whole group of girls went to give him love letters, and all they got in response were a bunch of prescriptions, nothing sugarcoated. He diagnosed them with things like adult acne and obesity without batting an eye. You’re saying he’s actually been with a woman before?”

Xue Meng opened his mouth only to realize there was nothing he could say, no matter how badly he wanted to. He pressed his lips shut. “No. I meant he was an evil leech.”

“That’s for sure.”

Xue Meng resolved to change the subject. He still held a deep grudge against Jiang Xi, and any more talk might lead to a slip of the tongue. “Tell me more about your shizun,” he said. “How did he abandon you? If you couldn’t bear to be apart from him, why didn’t you follow him?”

“I couldn’t bear to be apart from him?” Miss Treated scoffed. “Ridiculous. I don’t care for him at all.” There was a pause. She stole a look at Xue Meng and asked in a smaller voice, “How could you tell?”

Xue Meng had a funny look on his face: a mix of anger, awkwardness, and exasperation. “There’s someone I know,” he said after a long beat, as if the words cost him dearly. “He acted just like you.”

“Really? How so?”

Xue Meng snorted. “When he came of age, he complained about his shizun all the time—said he was too cold, said he was mean to him and picked on him all the time. He even said he didn’t care for him at all, not the slightest bit.”

Engrossed in the story, Miss Treated reached for the peanuts. “And then? What did he do?”

Xue Meng crossed his arms and rolled his eyes. “What do you think? He regretted it. Regretted it so much he rolled around on the ground crying for him to come back. He did *everything*, going to the ends of the earth and scurrying after him like a servant—so let me give you some advice. It’s best not to burn any bridges. You may wish you hadn’t.”

His story didn’t have the intended effect. Miss Treated leaned back with her chin jutting and sneered. “*I’d* never cry for someone to come back. If I didn’t want him to go, there’re plenty of ways I could’ve made him stay.”

Xue Meng hesitated to plunge the knife into her heart—but he *had* to make her see reason. “Did he, though?”

Miss Treated’s smile froze on her face.

“Weren’t you discarded just the same?” Another knife.

She wasn’t smiling anymore.

A third knife. “Didn’t he leave you and then, in your absence, shack up with someone new?”

Watching Miss Treated’s eyes flicker with hot rage, Xue Meng drove home his point: “Look,” he said. “If you’d been honest with him earlier—if you weren’t so proud—maybe he would’ve stayed.”

Miss Treated sagged, her anger seemingly snuffed out. She was still tense, but grief flickered in her eyes. “It was my fault he left when he did,” she admitted.

Xue Meng waited patiently.

“I didn’t want him to go. I never… I never…” She trailed off. Before she turned her face aside, Xue Meng saw that the rims of her eyes were red.

Internally, Xue Meng began to flail. *Aiya, is she going to start crying?* He’d gone his whole life without learning how to comfort women.

But he needn’t have worried—*this* woman only became harsher with tears in her eyes. “So what if he left.” She ground the words between her teeth. “He’s nothing special. It’s not like I can’t live without him.”

Xue Meng blinked.

“Enough about that. Just talking about it makes me upset.” Miss Treated poured herself another cup of tea and tossed it back. “Let me tell you about that pretentious little thug.”

A decade of resentment seemed to settle over Miss Treated at the mention of the other woman. She raised a finger with fervor, ready to rail against the man-snatching floozy, but due to her limited vocabulary, she seemed unable to find the words to properly convey her fury.

“I just don’t get it,” she said at last with a gusty exhale. “How is he better than me?”

“Um,” said Xue Meng. “What does your shizun like better about her?”

“*Better*?” snarled Miss Treated. “If he thinks that rascal is better than I am, I’ll make him pay it back twice over in bed!”

Exhausted, Xue Meng kneaded at his temples. “Then let’s pretend this was an unrelated party—for example, me. What traits would I think you’re lacking compared to her?”

Only then did Miss Treated put her brain to the task. After a long moment, she replied stormily, “Nothing. Neither of us were born rich, but he wasted his time and did nothing to improve himself. I, on the other hand, worked hard to move up in the world. When he wants to treat Shizun, he can only afford to take him to eat cheap street food—whereas *I* could let Shizun skip rocks with ten tons of pure gold if he wanted.”

Xue Meng thought he was exaggerating. “Sure, and pigs could fly.”

Miss Treated didn’t catch on at all. “I could get him faepigs too, but I don’t know if they fly,” she said. “I’m successful, I’m rich, I can be the breadwinner. When my shizun was with me, he stayed in the fanciest chambers and wore the finest clothes. I made sure he had the best of everything.”

Xue Meng jolted. “Your shizun is a sugar baby?”

“Why do you have to put it that way?” Miss Treated said grumpily. “It makes me happy to see him happy—I’d spend a fortune if that’s what it takes. But since he got with that tramp, he lives in a cheap shack and wears peasant clothes. He grows everything they eat and makes everything they use for the house—they’re so broke it’d make your hair stand on end. Tell me, how am I the worse choice of us two?”

Xue Meng had seen his fair share of doomed romances and star-crossed lovers. Putting himself in her shizun’s shoes, he said, “That’s not always how it works. Your shizun might not want you to be the provider. Think of it this way—say you had a dad, a good man who took care of you for decades and loved you with his whole heart. But he was poor most of your life. Would you like him?”

Miss Treated didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

“Say you had another dad…”

“Why are you always talking about dads?” Miss Treated couldn’t make heads or tails of this penchant for patriarchal analogies. “You have daddy issues or something?”

Xue Meng’s eyes went wide. “I-I-I-I was just trying to think of an example!” He barreled ahead. “Let’s say you have *another* dad, and that guy isn’t as kind as your original dad—actually he didn’t even know you existed, and he was mean to your mom—but he’s crazy rich. Would you like him?”

Miss Treated lost her temper instantly. “I’d cook him alive!”

Xue Meng blinked. “I wouldn’t go that far. I’m just trying to explain that *you* might think your lover is happy with riches, but maybe all he ever wanted was for you to read books with him or something…”

As she thought it over, Miss Treated's scowl deepened. Though her aura remained intimidating, her eyes were shaded with hurt. "So what if I'm not a big reader. So what if I'm uncultured. I hunkered down and studied for a decade all on my own, but I'm still not as good as someone who went and wandered around for five years? All I've got is my money. If he doesn't like it, what else do I have?"

Xue Meng had a sudden image of a wolfhound thrown out into the rain by a master who didn't want her—pathetically hurt but still doing her best to sit upright and pretend she didn't care. He sighed. "Maybe that's not the issue. Is there anything else he likes about her?"

Miss Treated sulked. "I'm better at everything else too."

"For example?"

"My skin is fairer."

Xue Meng eyed her sun-kissed complexion with suspicion.

"Whatcha lookin' at?" retorted Miss Treated. "I mean I used to be, I got tanner recently—it's a long story I won't go into."

"Oh," said Xue Meng. "But I wasn't asking? What else."

"I'm more handsome, and I dress better. I'm more straightforward too—I don't overthink or beat around the bush. Also—I'm taller."

Miss Treated's last proclamation sounded suspiciously like a bald-faced lie—but this line of questioning wasn't getting them anywhere, regardless. The only thing Xue Meng was learning was how many of these sullen comparisons Miss Treated could come up with.

What was more, Xue Meng had realized Miss Treated was sorely lacking self-awareness. If you asked her about the other woman's strengths, she couldn't answer; if you asked about her weaknesses, she likewise had no idea. He had to change tack.

The quick-thinking Xue Meng turned to Miss Treated. "That's not specific enough. Why don't we play a game?"

"What kind of game?"

"Pretend I'm your shizun. I'll make some requests, and you act out how the homewrecker would react, then compare it to how you would react.

How does that sound?”

“You look pretty young, but you know what you’re talking about, don’t you?” Intrigued, Miss Treated sat up straighter. “I’ll bite. Hit me.”

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Xue Mengmeng's Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 7

THEN ACT XUE MENG would. The two of them got into position, ready to start.

"Listen up," said Xue Meng. "Right now, I'm your shizun, and you're you. We only have these chili stir-fries and spicy gudong pots in front of us, and we can't order anything else. I'm hungry. What do you do?"

Miss Treated didn't waste any breath. "Destroy the inn."

Xue Meng blinked.

"Stopping only when they make some non-spicy dishes."

This girl had no problem getting into character. Knitting her brow, she continued. "What kind of shitty place is this? Why can't they make anything mild?" She looked at Xue Meng. "You're my shizun, right?"

"Right."

"Okay. What would you like to eat?"

Xue Meng was only familiar with one person who didn't eat spice: Chu Wanning. So he named some dishes Chu Wanning liked. "I want crab meatballs, sweet and sour fish, vegetables with tofu, and lotus pastries."

For some reason, Miss Treated looked stunned.

"What is it?" asked Xue Meng.

"Nothing," said Miss Treated. "Sit here and wait. I'll go."

"You can't do anything to the inn!" yelped Xue Meng.

"No?" Miss Treated narrowed her eyes. "You never change. Always worrying about other people. Fine, I won't destroy the inn, but I'll go talk to the chef."

"Why?"

“I’ll give him two choices,” said Miss Treated darkly. “Make what I ask for and put no peppers in.”

“What’s the other choice?”

“Put the peppers in and I’ll chop off his hands.”

Xue Meng blinked.

“Be right back.” She got to her feet.

Xue Meng grew so mad he felt faint. “We’re only playing pretend! What the hell? Enough! Okay—stop roleplaying yourself, be the other woman! What would she do?” He hastily continued, “If she’d also destroy the place or chop someone’s hands off, let’s just stop here!”

“Destroy the place?” Miss Treated rolled her eyes. “He loves his reputation as much as he loves anything Shizun’s ever given him. Hold on, I’ll show you.”

It was a huge loss to the whole acting industry that Miss Treated hadn’t gone to the theater at Pear Garden. Within seconds, her entire aura changed. All that brazen wildness and arrogance melted away; she looked exactly the same, but somehow, she seemed much more mature, reliable, and considerate. She turned gentle eyes upon Xue Meng. Like a frog eyed by a snake, Xue Meng nearly jumped up and fled—this was just how it fucking felt when Mei Hanxue teased him! Shivers all the way up his spine, damnit!

When Miss Treated spoke, her tone, low and slightly hoarse, made Xue Meng’s skin crawl. “Shizun, you…”

“Ahh!” Xue Meng couldn’t help it. “Stop! Stop right there! Give me a second, I’m not ready!”

Miss Treated didn’t. She continued, deep in character, as if relishing his reaction. “Did I make a mistake?” she said, soft and sweet.

“*Aaaaah!* Stoppit, stop, stop!”

“I’m too dumb. I keep making Shizun unhappy when I only meant to please you. Shizun…I’m sorry.”

Xue Meng looked profoundly unwell. If he passed away now, he hoped his gravestone would bear the inscription: *Died Rescuing a*

Downtrodden Young Lady.

But this young lady was having a grand time; she had no intention of breaking character. “The dishes here… They’re not to Shizun’s taste, right? I’ll go talk to the chef right now.”

Flailing like a carp hauled onto shore, Xue Meng grabbed her by the arm. “Hey! Didn’t you promise not to do anything to the inn? I won’t let you make trouble around Wuchang Town.”

“Make trouble? For the inn?” Miss Treated widened her beautiful eyes and smiled. “What are you thinking, Shizun? The head chef here doesn’t have much experience with mild dishes—how could I impose on him like that? I brought some silver with me; I’ll give him a bit and ask him to let me use the side kitchen. Whatever Shizun wants to eat, I’ll make it personally.”

Her voice softened further, as tender now as a burbling brook. “You want crab meatballs, sweet and sour fish, tofu with vegetables, and lotus pastries, right?”

Xue Meng was speechless. He didn’t feel like he could say no.

“We need fresh crab roe for the meatballs, black vinegar for the sweet and sour fish, vegetables fresh out of the field for the tofu, and the lotus pastries will need rose-flavored red bean paste to be sweet enough.”

Nonono. Xue Meng stared at her in terror. *You’re plenty sweet, you’re more than sweet enough, okay? Can you quit the act now?!*

“The kitchen might not have everything we need. I’ll go to the market, but it’ll take some time.” Miss Treated reached out to pat the air above Xue Meng’s head—it was only pretend, so she didn’t actually touch him. “I’ll make Shizun another bowl of lotus-root tangyuan. Don’t be angry. Wait for me; I’ll hurry back as soon as I can.”

This was the first time Xue Meng had tried to help a woman—a poor, downtrodden maiden who’d given her heart to the wrong man but would not, under any circumstances, see reason. All of a sudden he felt a surge of respect for Mei Hanxue. One young lady already required all his martial skill, every bit of his patience, and now, she was testing the limits of his talent for acting. How impressive must Mei Hanxue be, to have all those

affairs but still remain so light and carefree? Xue Meng wouldn't last a month in his shoes!

Covered in goosebumps and still unable to muster a reply, Xue Meng heard the room's little bamboo door crash open. He turned, but before he could catch a glimpse of the newcomer's face, a golden willow vine ripped through the air in front of him and struck Miss Treated on the hand. She hissed in pain—but the sight of the vine stopped the oncoming tantrum in its tracks. "You—?"

Xue Meng paled, crying out against his will, "T-Tianwen?!"

Just as he expected, the man who stepped into the room wore white robes and a high ponytail. His bearing was as ethereal as an immortal fallen to earth, but his aura was as sharp as a lightning storm. Who else could it be but Tianwen's wielder, Chu Wanning?

Fortunately, Xue Meng was still wearing Master Ma's illusion pouch, so Chu Wanning didn't recognize him. He merely cast a sidelong glance at Xue Meng before turning to Miss Treated. Impatience was writ all over the Beidou Immortal's coolly aloof and elegant face; his voice, when he spoke, simmered with barely contained fury. "Mo Weiyu! How long are you planning to carry on like this?"

Xue Meng gaped. "M-M-Mo… You're M-M-M-Mo…"

"I'm *not* Mo-zongshi." Taxian-jun cut him off brusquely. "Don't get it twisted."

Was there a difference?! Xue Meng felt dark clouds rolling in on him, a storm flickering in their depths. When he recalled his conversation with Miss Treated, a bolt of lightning seemed to pierce the sky and strike him down, leaving him fried crispy on the outside and juicy on the inside…

Heavens above! What the hell was that conversation they'd just had?! He'd called Chu Wanning a filthy liar and a cultivation world loser! He'd said Chu Wanning was as much of a shameless player and soulless breaker of hearts as Jiang Xi! H-h-h-he'd even taken the role of trusted confidant and listened as Mo Weiyu described all those bedroom affairs he didn't want to know a damn thing about! In bed, in the garden, in the hot springs —would someone please, please rescue him and give him a forgetfulness

pill? He'd swallow it without a second thought, even if it came from Jiang Xi himself!

Tianwen *had* struck Taxian-jun, but Chu Wanning was only trying to keep him from putting his paws on an "innocent girl." It wasn't a serious blow, barely enough to break skin.

But there was no beating the truly shameless. Taxian-jun made sure to squeeze the scratch so hard it bled, then presented his wound to Chu Wanning for inspection. In a display of incredible melodrama, he raised the scratch to his mouth and lapped at it threateningly. "Very well, Chu Wanning. Your boldness knows no bounds. This venerable one will remember the blood you shed today."

Chu Wanning stared at him.

"This venerable one will make you regret it, make you—"

Tianwen crackled in Chu Wanning's hands. He narrowed his eyes. "Are you *done*? Want another one to match the first, do you?"

Taxian-jun flew into a rage. "Chu Wanning! Don't get too haughty just because this venerable one spoils you! If you dare strike me with Tianwen again, this venerable one will—will—"

Those phoenix eyes narrowed. "Oh," said Chu Wanning dangerously. "Will what?"

Taxian-jun slammed his palm down on the table. "This venerable one will fuck you to death!"

Xue Meng was struck by an intense feeling of déjà vu. Why had he been present the last time his cousin threatened to fuck his shizun to death, and why was he present again? He didn't want to overhear conversations like this!

Chu Wanning had apparently overestimated Taxian-jun's sense of propriety and underestimated the thinness of his own skin. His face instantly darkened, and he glanced helplessly at Xue Meng before lowering his voice in fury. "Mo Weiyu, you're an embarrassment! Hurry up and come home with me!"

"Home?" Taxian-jun snorted. "Nope! The whole world belongs to this venerable one—what's wrong with coming here incognito to give a

beauty my favor?" He grabbed Xue Meng and patted him on the shoulder. "I'll introduce you. This is this venerable one's newest favorite, known as…" He cleared his throat. "Known as…"

He wracked his brains for a title like "Riverside Immortal" or "Maiden of Peerless Beauty." Given all the classic works of literature he'd gone through in his years spent alone, he should've been able to make one up on the spot. But since going into seclusion at Nanping Mountain, Taxian-jun's days were lively and full. He no longer stayed in Wushan Palace all by himself, nor was he so bored he needed to while away his time reading or training. He was content, and there were all sorts of pleasant things he could do to fill his time. Taxian-jun's self-improvement strategy had dropped from sophisticated reading material back to the lowest of lowbrow slop; he was in no mood to ever touch again the *Book of Changes* or the *Book of Songs*, which he'd read alone in Wushan Palace.

After all, Chu Wanning was his again. Taxian-jun could watch him copy out *my heart is not a stone; it cannot be rolled*[2] as many times as he wanted. He no longer had to desperately conjure the man's shattered afterimage from ancient tomes, let alone rejoice in happiness only to collapse in grief after stumbling across a line Chu Wanning had once taught him. Well-fed in other respects, Emperor Taxian-jun's reading habits fell back into degeneracy. Other than the *God-Knows-What Rankings*, the only books he'd read this year were the hardcover collector's editions of *Sex and the Cultivation World*, books one through ten.

After agonizing over the matter for an excruciating moment, he slapped a hand on the table and, with the other around Xue Meng's shoulders, pronounced, "Known as the Prince of Pussy—Proudfury Long."

Chu Wanning froze.

Xue Meng had gone nearly purple, his face even more livid than his shizun's. Furious, he spat, "Prince your ass! Y-you potty-mouthed pervert! I-I-I'm not… I'm not…" Apoplectic with rage, he couldn't find the words to explain. He gave up and tried to yank the illusion pouch off, only to realize his stupid hands had tied a double knot when he'd left the house.

The rascal Taxian-jun had no idea who he was and assumed Xue Meng was still game to help him piss off Chu Wanning. He stomped on Xue Meng's foot and put his mouth to Xue Meng's ear, ready with bribes. "Get

with the program. This is the guy who lost my brocade pouch. Once we're done here, I'll give you a huge red envelope—at least a hundred gold leaves, okay?"

With a howl of fury, Xue Meng shredded the pouch with spiritual energy and whipped out the scimitar Longcheng. He kicked the chairs aside and pounced on Taxian-jun with his weapon held aloft, screaming, "Mo Weiyu! You're a dog! Not a person! Who the hell you calling a prince?! Who the hell is Proudfury Long?! And you're out here trying to make Shizun jealous?! Stop running! I'm going to chop off your dog head!"

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Xue Mengmeng's Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 8

A WISE MAN of the jianghu once said that the hardest way to make a living wasn't operating a charnel house or begging on the streets, but rather running an inn.

Throughout history, skilled fighters from every walk of life seemed to gravitate toward inns. They'd go there to have their clandestine affairs, start their all-out brawls, and fight for their lovers' favor. There were even those who—like Taxian-jun and Sect Leader Xue here, their disagreement clearly a private one between brothers—were completely capable of traversing the two steps it would take to get back to Sisheng Peak, but simply wouldn't. They had to duel right here in the inn, the bird pecking at the dog and the dog snapping at the bird's tail feathers.

The owner of the inn, an old woman, was mightily displeased. She shuffled out with cane in hand and introduced herself out of the blue. "I, Shi Longxia, old lady."

The other three exchanged glances of bewilderment. It was Taxian-jun who waved a hand and proclaimed, "I, Mo Weiyu, emperor." He pointed at Chu Wanning. "Him, Chu Wanning, immortal master." Then Xue Meng. "Him…eh, who cares."

Xue Meng gaped at him.

"Scared now?" Taxian-jun asked her.

Old Lady Shi Longxia was not at all cowed by this show of force. She waved her cane at the mess all over the ground, her voice sonorous. "You have, no manners!"

Xue Meng went scarlet; Chu Wanning wasn't much better.

Taxian-jun crossed his arms, unbothered, and looked down his nose at the woman. "Hey, grandma, don't you know who I am? Haven't you heard of this venerable one's heroic deeds? All that the sun touches is my kingdom—if not for this venerable one's great battle with the gods in the

apocalyptic flood, your shitty little inn would be wood chips and crumbling bricks by now! So what's the big deal about destroying a few tables?"

"Mo Weiyu!" snapped Chu Wanning.

Taxian-jun cleared his throat. "O-or this venerable one will just pay for it! Name your price! A hundred taels of silver should do it, right?"

Innkeeper Shi Longxia was not moved by riches either. She continued glaring at them, cheeks hollowed in fury as she repeated her earlier statement with impressive force. "You have no *manners*!"

"Hey, you—"

Xue Meng shoved Taxian-jun aside and awkwardly advanced. "I'm so sorry, ma'am. My temper got the better of me. I accidentally destroyed all these rooms and the furniture, and—I see I left a few holes in your roof. Allow me to make you a formal apology, and of course I'll compensate you for all damages at market prices. Does that work?" He turned to Chu Wanning. "Shizun, do you think that'll do?"

The old lady struck the floor with her cane before Chu Wanning could reply. Her voice was just as angry as before. "You have—"

"No manners," said Taxian-jun with an impatient roll of his eyes. "'Scuse me, old lady, what the hell do you want? You have your apology and your money, and you're still yammering on about manners. Take a step back and think. You can say this venerable one has no manners, no problem—and if you say Xue Meng doesn't have any, this venerable one wouldn't really care to change your mind. But shouldn't you at least take a look at him?" He tugged Chu Wanning closer. "Are you blind?"

Chu Wanning struggled against Taxian-jun's hold, sleeves flapping. Those sharp brows furrowed as he snapped, "Get away from me."

"This venerable one shan't." Rather than let go, Taxian-jun hummed and tightened his grip until Chu Wanning was crushed to his side. Grabbing the other man's jaw, he lowered his voice and licked his lips. "Unless you say *pretty please*."

Xue Meng stared.

"Piss! Off!" hissed Chu Wanning.

The old lady seemed truly unswayed by the fact the savior of the cultivation world was standing in front of her. She thumped her cane again, grumbling under her breath. “No manners!”

The others looked at each other again. This time, even Chu Wanning was a bit at a loss. This wrinkly old woman, who couldn’t touch a hair on their heads if she’d wanted to, had managed to render three famed cultivators totally helpless in a dark little corner of her inn.

Just then, creaking footsteps sounded on the stairs. A little girl ran up the steps and grabbed the old innkeeper’s arm. “Sorry about that!” she cried in her piping voice. “So sorry! Grandma can’t see or hear, so she doesn’t know what’s going on. She doesn’t recognize any of you, or know what you did.”

“Aha.” Xue Meng looked thoughtful. “So that’s why. No wonder…”

Taxian-jun blinked and cleared his throat awkwardly. “Why didn’t she say so?” he groused.

“Huh?” The little girl blinked in confusion. “She should’ve, that’s the first thing my grandma ever says to anyone.”

“What does she say?”

“She says *shi long xia*—that she’s a deaf and blind old lady.”

Chu Wanning and Xue Meng both fell silent.

Taxian-jun turned. “So who was it that thought her name was Shi Longxia?”

“It was you, you damn mutt!” snarled Xue Meng.

They’d wrecked the old lady’s inn and couldn’t find any woodworkers to repair it on such short notice. Spotting storm clouds brewing on the horizon, the three of them stayed to fix the place before it rained. One of them was a grandmaster skilled in building intricate mechanisms, another had spent many years of his life fending for himself, and the third had often helped Xue Zhengyong around the sect. When they worked together, fixing a few chairs and tables and rooftops was no problem.

Rain started pouring the moment the final beam was patched. An impenetrable fog had rolled in and enveloped Wuchang Town; the storm

was so torrential the old lady's granddaughter bade them stay overnight and head home the next day.

For Chu Wanning and the others, putting up a rain barrier was no trouble at all—but it was still unpleasant to travel in such weather, and it'd been a long time since the three of them had put their work aside and gathered in one place. Rain couldn't keep them trapped. But sentiment did. Chu Wanning saw Xue Meng eyeing him piteously and sighed. He turned to the little girl. "Then we'll put you to the trouble of staying."

"No worries at all!" The child knew very well who they were. Cheeks flushed with delight, she skipped off to prepare rooms and dinner.

The atmosphere at dinner was strange. Mo Ran had been right all those years ago: The three of them were no longer comfortable under the same roof. Although Xue Meng missed them dearly and still wished to return to those days in which they were inseparable, certain truths had been revealed, and to feign ignorance would be futile. They couldn't pretend as if nothing had happened and go on like before.

Could Xue Meng pretend not to know what they were to each other? Clearly not. Though he tried to talk to Chu Wanning like usual, there was an oddness to it—especially after he'd been told that, back at Taobao Estate, Mo Ran had once taken Chu Wanning in his mouth right in front of him, just behind the bed-curtain. A great deal of time had passed since then, and the worst of his breakdown was long over, but when he sat across from them, he couldn't help but remember this particular fact, then start to imagine…

Chu Wanning and Mo Ran…

His shizun and his cousin…

Ew…

He very much wanted to know if Chu Wanning had been so badly bullied back then that he had been unable to fight back. After all, that brute Mo Ran was seriously impossible. But he was too afraid to ask or to even mention it, so he only stared at Chu Wanning, the words struggling to make their way past his lips.

“Shizun…”

“Hm?”

“Have some more meat.”

“Shizun…”

“Mn.”

“Um, have some more meat.”

“Shizun…”

Silence.

“…Just have some more meat.”

After mustering his courage over and over only to lose it at the last second, Xue Meng was exhausted. Taxian-jun watched Sect Leader Xue trying to butter up the Beidou Immortal and for once did nothing. He looked totally unruffled, gnawing on his bones and sneering.

They ate in silence. Chu Wanning folded first, unable to endure the awkwardness. “I’m heading up to my room,” he said, rising to his feet.

“I won’t see you off,” said Taxian-jun.

Scowling, Chu Wanning left with a whirl of his sleeves. Xue Meng finally lost his temper and threw his chopsticks onto the table. “Mo Weiyu!”

Taxian-jun watched him smugly, worrying the bone in his mouth. “What, still want a fuck?”

“You—” Xue Meng ground his teeth. “You ungrateful jerk!”

“What’s *your* problem, your highness?”

“…Huh?”

“Your highness, the Prince of Pussy.”

Xue Meng nearly throttled him. The two of them tussled again until they were both panting, then glared at each other across the table. Xue Meng smacked its wooden surface. “Tell me! Why cheat on Shizun?!”

“Hey, hold on a moment, Xue Meng dear. Whose lapdog are you? When you still had that sachet on, you also thought he should treat this

venerable one better. You said he was a cultivation world deadbeat like Jiang Xi. Those were your own words."

"You were taking things out of context!" Xue Meng screeched. "What the hell do you mean he abandoned you to years of neglect? He was… He'd already been…" *Reduced to ashes, for their sake, and for the world's.*

The misunderstandings had been resolved and the whole story explained, but this facet of the past was still too painful to put in words for Xue Meng and Taxian-jun alike.

Taxian-jun glared at him. "Don't say it."

"I wasn't going to."

The two locked eyes. "Shizun would never be unfaithful to anyone," said Xue Meng. "I'd stake my life on it. You must have made up that homewrecker you were talking about!"

"This venerable one did *not*!"

"Then who is it?"

"That dickhead Mo-zongshi!"

"You…" Xue Meng fell silent. He was totally flummoxed, so baffled it took him a minute to follow. When realization dawned, he pressed both hands to the table and leapt to his feet, furious. "Are you nuts?! All this time—all this time I wasted with you—and it was just you complaining about your own damn self? Are you totally insane? Getting jealous of *yourself*? Y-y-you…you really should go to Guyueye and get your head checked! Do you want me to book an appointment with Jiang Xi on your behalf? I'll get you a discount if you mention my name in the referral!"

"Oh?" In some respects, Taxian-jun was very sharp indeed. He looked up, eyes sparkling with curiosity, and plucked out the most important detail. "Why *your* name?"

"I—"

"Since when were the two of you so close?"

"I, I…"

Xue Meng stuttered for an age but couldn't form the words. If there was one mystery Taxian-jun had gone two lifetimes without knowing, it was the truth of Xue Meng's parentage. He had no clue about Xue Meng and Jiang Xi's real relationship. As he watched Xue Meng's little face turn pale and then red and then slightly green, pinched with something he couldn't say, an epiphany blazed through Taxian-jun's heart.

Aha! So *that's* what it was!

He himself had gotten an older man into bed, and liked men as cold and aloof as Chu Wanning. He was certain other men shared his tastes, so when he put himself in Xue Meng's shoes, his imagination immediately ran wild. He studied Xue Meng, thinking to himself, *Wow, you'd never be able to tell…*

"You don't have to say." All the viciousness disappeared from Taxian-jun's manner. He rose, filling a wine cup with the bravura another hero demanded. He drained it, then showed Xue Meng the empty cup with earnest admiration. "Bro, in my absence you've, um…" He cleared his throat. "Grown by heaps and pounds! You really scored! Congratulations!"

Xue Meng stared at him in confusion. It had to be said that Xue Meng truly didn't have enough experience with Mo Ran in Taxian-jun mode. He had grown used to his respectable cousin Mo-zongshi and didn't know one important fact: When talking to Taxian-jun, the words *you scored* were rarely used for innocent purposes. Even after Xue Meng had been forcibly toasted and rendered insensate from a single drink, he still didn't understand why Taxian-jun was praising him, or what his congratulations had been for.

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Xue Mengmeng's Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 9

TAXIAN-JUN DISDAINFULLY hauled Xue Meng back to his room, tossed him in bed, and threw a blanket over him. "You really are a lightweight."

He didn't go to Chu Wanning's room after he was done with Xue Meng. He bought a few more jugs of wine and sat on the stairs, drowning his sorrows.

The more he drank, the more forlorn he felt. He shot a glance toward the room at the end of the hallway, whose lights had gone out. Chu Wanning hadn't bothered to come talk to him or make sure he came to bed. He had just gone to sleep by himself!

Taxian-jun ground his teeth. If it had been Mo-zongshi out here, Chu Wanning would surely have come out to sit and talk gently to him, right?

The thought only made him madder. He opened another jar and took a large gulp.

Xue Meng had said he and Mo-zongshi were the same, and so had Chu Wanning. Mo-zongshi himself said there was no difference between them, that they were just the same person at two different stages of life.

They're wrong! thought Taxian-jun miserably. They *weren't* the same! Anyone could tell by the way Chu Wanning treated them. Why'd he throw away the pouch Taxian-jun gave him and keep that hypocrite's raggedy sack? And they all made fun of him for being uncultured. For not being well-read! He deserved better, damn it!

Even that damn Chu Wanning didn't care about him. Sure, he'd come to Wuchang Town in search of him—but he hadn't said a single nice thing, or apologized for throwing away his Qixi present. Taxian-jun had pored over so many books to find his favorite lines to embroider on that pouch; it was one of a kind!

Ungrateful jerk!

Eventually, the wine went to his head. He clutched at the banister, face set in a mask that said *This vulnerable one is unhappy*. Dazed, he seemed to hear the sound of a door opening; footsteps approached him and stopped by his side.

He looked up. In the faint halo of the candlelight, he saw the handsome face he'd hated wrongfully for half his life, hungered after for a decade, and adored for two lifetimes.

"Chu Wanning…" he mumbled.

Just saying the name made his heart well up and ache. With or without the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows, his greatest desire had always been for Chu Wanning. His heart felt soaked in that desire, but beyond the lust lay heartache, tenderness, sadness, and affection. How could he possibly not love him? The depth of his feelings was no less profound than his counterpart's.

But what could he do? He'd spent over a decade as someone else's puppet, and then as a walking corpse. The Flower of Eightfold Sorrows had hollowed him out. He was like a dragon trapped in darkness for too long; he'd grown accustomed to loneliness and violence as his only companions. When the mortal world's sunlight unreservedly surrounded him once more, he had been secretly afraid. That evil dragon had snarled fiercely, baring wounded claws that nevertheless remained sharp, acting like his venerable self was above the need for companionship—especially from the likes of Chu Wanning.

In truth, only he knew how fervently he envied the version of himself that had gotten a fresh start. Even when every piece of evidence was laid before him; even if everyone told him Mo-zongshi and he were one and the same, he refused to admit it. He chose to contradict the world and say, *No. This venerable one is not the same as him.*

But he also knew he was lying. It was only because, back at Wushan Palace, he'd dreamed too many times of starting anew. In his dreams, the world was warm and bright, and *he* was by his side—but when he woke up, all of it was gone. He'd lie in that massive bed, surrounded by the fluttering canopy, and hate himself for waking up. He loathed the God of Dreams for breaking his illusions, and despised Zhuang Zhou for denying him his butterfly.[3]

Every time he cried *This venerable one isn't Mo-zongshi!* he was hoping for someone to come console him—preferably with several thousand palace handmaidens in tow, ready to tell him a hundred times a day that he *was* Mo-zongshi, that they were the same. Only then would he feel at ease.

"How have you drunk this much?" Chu Wanning frowned and bent to help him up. Instead, Taxian-jun reached out and tugged him down.

"Mo Ran, what are you doing *now*…mngh…"

He held Chu Wanning so tightly, pressing his lips to his in a fierce and passionate kiss—but as the kiss heated up, he seemed to check himself. He slowed, his movements growing gentler, as if intentionally trying to mimic someone else.

"This venerable one can do it too…" The lingering scent of wine mingled with Taxian-jun's soppy kisses. He mumbled, barely comprehensible, "'S not hard."

Chu Wanning had no idea what Taxian-jun was talking about. He remained tense. This hallway was too wide, devoid of anything to hide behind. Anyone might come by and see him like this—he tried to worm away, but Taxian-jun only pressed him harder against the banister and kissed him more deeply. Considering Taxian-jun's usual way of doing things, getting down to business right here in the stairwell wasn't out of the realm of possibility.

Yet before Chu Wanning could begin to struggle in earnest, Taxian-jun pulled away. Those eyes, so dark they glinted purple, were downcast. He stared at Chu Wanning's glistening mouth and pressed closer for another kiss, still unsatisfied. Then, like a puppy seeking to please their owner, he kissed him lightly once again.

Chu Wanning sat stock-still. Taxian-jun kissed him three times and stopped. Though his eyes were still glittering with hunger, he restrained himself and folded Chu Wanning into his arms. He sighed. "Tell me, is this venerable one dreaming again…?"

This man was wild and untamable; it was rare for him to bury his face in the crook of Chu Wanning's neck and speak with a hitch in his voice. It took Chu Wanning only a moment to figure it out. He'd always

understood Mo Ran best in this world, even if it was only a scrap or a wisp of his souls.

Chu Wanning reached up to pat his shoulder, the way he'd done when he was still a boy. "You're not dreaming. But you should come to bed. Let's go, come back to the room with me."

Even half-asleep, Taxian-jun dug in his heels. "No," he grumbled. "Not going."

"What's gotten into you?" asked Chu Wanning, exasperated.

Taxian-jun was despondent, and he made it known in low-voiced mutterings that nevertheless sounded deeply hurt. "You put the candle out and didn't even come check on this venerable one…"

This man had been the emperor of the mortal world in the past lifetime, but when he was drunk and nuzzling into the crook of his neck, he put Chu Wanning in mind of a beautiful concubine pouting for favor. The mental image rendered him momentarily speechless. At last he said, "Didn't I learn this from you? You're the one who said those afraid to come inside will come once the lights are out."

"Ridiculous." Taxian-jun remained brazen even while half conscious. "This venerable one fears nothing…" His voice trailed off. "Chu Wanning…"

"Hm?"

"Wanning…"

No reply came.

His voice shrank to the softest entreaty, as small and lost as when he was no more than a boy. "Shizun…"

Chu Wanning reached out to pat his head. "Mn."

"Will you still be here when I wake up?"

Chu Wanning closed his eyes, repeating the words he'd said most often in their two years of seclusion. "I'll always be here."

Only then did Taxian-jun settle. His breathing evened, and the drunken emperor, now soothed, slept at last. Chu Wanning gathered him up with care and took him back to their room. Safely in bed, his features were

slack with sleep and totally nonthreatening; he looked just like the young man Chu Wanning had taken in all those years ago, who'd saved earthworms with an umbrella over his shoulder.

The poisonous flower had withered. Those nightmares would never seize him again.

But—

"Then why did you throw away this venerable one's pouch?! This venerable one *will* go on dates! This venerable one wants…Taobao Estate's gift bundle… Five hundred…"

Rare editions of erotica. Thankfully, the last part sank into a sleepy mumble Chu Wanning couldn't parse.

Even without knowing about the smutty novels, Chu Wanning felt a terrible headache coming on. He'd never, ever tell Xue Meng the reason he'd "lost" the brocade pouch was because Taxian-jun had shamelessly embroidered lines from the bawdy folksong "Eighteen Caresses" all over it. In comparison to the sutra Mo-zongshi had embroidered on his, of course no one would choose to wear something with such indecent lyrics out in public.

And he'd never, ever tell Mo Ran that the ridiculous pouch adorned with Taxian-jun's special flair hadn't been thrown out at all. Chu Wanning had placed it in a locked wooden box only he could open, next to everything else Mo Ran had ever given him.

The next day, Xue Meng rose bright and early. It wasn't every day he got to wake up under the same roof as Chu Wanning; he planned to buy some breakfast Shizun liked as an act of filial piety. But when he went downstairs, he found the table next to the window filled to bursting, and Mo Ran getting the bowls and chopsticks ready.

Spotting him on the stairs, Mo Ran smiled. "You're up early."

Xue Meng blinked. Intellectually, he knew Mo Ran's personality switched every fourth day; it was still a strange thing to witness for himself. Xue Meng stood frozen for a long time before awkwardly making a sound of acknowledgment.

“Sorry about yesterday. I’m like that sometimes.”

Xue Meng scratched his head, uncomfortable. “Whatever. It’s not the first time I’ve seen you act up.” He went to the table and looked at the offerings, unable to stop himself from asking, “You borrowed the kitchen?”

“Yep.” Mo-zongshi beamed at him, then set a plate of golden-brown and crispy pan-fried buns in front of him. “There’s a pot of congee on the stove too. Do me a favor and help me get three bowls?”

Xue Meng acquiesced and followed Mo Ran into the kitchen.

The savory fragrance of congee filled the air with the hot steam when the lid was removed. Plump shrimp and slices of fish peeked from within the rice. Mo Ran nimbly ladled three bowls, while Xue Meng grabbed the side dishes. A sliced boiled egg, still liquid in its golden center, was nestled atop the piping-hot congee and sprinkled with white sesame, slivered green onions, crispy fried dough bits, and a few drops of toasted sesame oil. It was a mouthwatering sight to be sure.

Curious, Xue Meng asked, “Ta…um, the you from yesterday. Does he know how to make this too?”

“Yes,” said Mo Ran. “And he’s just as good a cook. But he’s stubborn. A lot of these recipes are ones he worked on when he was in control, but he won’t make them himself. He just saves them for me to do.”

“Then why did Shizun throw out his pouch and keep yours?” Xue Meng grumbled.

Mo Ran sliced open another egg, then turned to smile at Xue Meng. “We’re the same person. It’s too embarrassing to explain, so I can’t tell you.”

Xue Meng raised his eyebrows. “Is embarrassing yourself in front of me a rare occurrence? What’s with the prim and proper act now? Were you not embarrassed to call me the prince of something-something yesterday? Speaking of which, that score has yet to be settled—”

Mo-zongshi was a man who obeyed his own whims. He immediately changed his tune. “We’re two different people. It’s best if you wait for Taxian-jun to come back for that.”

Xue Meng sighed.

“By the way.” As he put the finishing touches on the last bowl of seafood congee, Mo Ran seemed to remember something. He turned on Xue Meng with a look of complete seriousness. “I feel I should warn you.”

His sudden formality startled Xue Meng badly. What was this tension in the air? “G-go on.”

“I don’t know what you’re thinking, or what happened between the two of you for you to be…that close all of a sudden. It’s a private matter between you; I won’t pry.”

Xue Meng blinked. “Huh?”

“You’re still young; you can experiment. But he’s older, richer, and holds a higher position than you do—it’s not an easy thing for him to choose to be with you. You have a wild temper. Remember to rein yourself in and try to be more accommodating. I’ll keep your secret. If there’s anything that confuses you, come to Nanping Mountain when Shizun’s not there and we’ll talk about it.” Mo Ran patted him on the shoulder. “Don’t do what I did and go out on fake dates to make him angry.”

“I’m surprised you have the nerve to even bring it up.” Xue Meng paused, then shook his head. “W-wait, what are you talking about?”

Mo Ran gazed at him warmly, the very picture of an indulgent older brother. “Don’t worry. Gege knows what you’re going through. When you think about it, both Shizun and Jiang-zunzhu are the lofty and prideful sort; they’ve got touchy tempers. You’re younger, so when you argue, you should be first to admit fault. It’s important to keep the peace at home, you know.”

Xue Meng’s face drained of color. “Y-you know? How did you find out? He and I… I…I’m not!”

“I figured it out yesterday,” said Mo Ran. “That’s why I congratulated you.”

“Is it that obvious?” asked Xue Meng, distraught.

Smiling, Mo Ran patted him again. “It’s…not. But I guess you should watch what you say.”

Xue Meng was almost frantic. He thought he’d kept things well under wraps—how had Mo Ran figured out in moments that he and Jiang Xi were father and son?!

Thankfully, as Xue Meng drifted out of the kitchen, stupefied, he didn't hear Mo Ran's sigh. "It's so strange. What *happened* in these last two years? Since when did Xue Meng get together with Jiang Yechen? Didn't he always prefer girls? Ah, it really makes no sense…"

Even by the time he bid Mo Ran and Chu Wanning farewell, Xue Meng had no idea that Mo Ran's impression of him had changed so drastically—that he now considered him a compatriot.

When they said their goodbyes, Xue Meng tugged on Mo Ran's sleeve and hissed anxiously, "You'd better not say a word about me and Jiang Yechen!" *You can't tell anyone I'm that bastard's son!*

Mo Ran earnestly put up his hand to make an oath. "I'll keep your secret." *I won't tell anyone you're bedding Sect Leader Jiang.*

Before Chu Wanning's confused gaze, the brothers nodded in tacit understanding. The elder took Chu Wanning back to Nanping Mountain, while the younger stepped through limpid pools of rainwater, glistening in the morning sunlight, on his way to the mist-veiled Sisheng Peak.

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Xue Mengmeng's Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 10

AFTER THAT, Xue Meng went on almost a dozen dates in quick succession—but his partners were either much uglier than he expected once the pouch was off, or they were at each other's throats before the illusions were even removed.

Xue Meng had already been suspicious of Master Ma's device, and after so many flops, these suspicions only deepened.

He finally reached the eleventh cultivator, who simpered at him, "I just looove Taxian-jun. I desperately want to be his empress, but being his concubine would do. I hear Taxian-jun loves children, and so do I. Don't you think we're a match made in heaven? If he would deign to marry me, I'd give him a baby every year until we had a whole house full."

Xue Meng lost it. Not just his marbles, his temper as well. "Y-you! Don't you know what Mo Ran and Chu-zongshi are to each other?!"

"Yep." The girl covered her face, blushing prettily. "I wouldn't get jealous of Chu-zongshi. I'd have Chu-zongshi's kids too."

Xue Meng flipped the table in rage. "What are you, a homewrecker? Are you insane?!"

"Hey, don't call me names!"

"Forget calling you names—if you talk about Chu-zongshi like that again, I'll beat you up!"

"How dare you!" the lady replied, enraged.

"Why wouldn't I dare?! Is there something wrong with your brain? If you want Taxian-jun, why are you wasting other people's time with the Matching Scroll? Go up Nanping Mountain and stalk him!"

The girl rolled up her sleeves, all her coquettishness gone. "Ya think I haven't tried?" she cried, shocking Xue Meng with her ferocity. "I went up there to offer myself, and he kicked me right down the stairs!"

Xue Meng burst out laughing.

“What are you laughing at?! As long as I want it bad enough, I’ll definitely get Taxian-jun on a blind date!”

“Sure.” Xue Meng scoffed. “And I’ll go ahead and give you another kick on Taxian-jun’s behalf!”

“Ah—!”

Amidst these miserable exploits and absurd incidents, Xue Meng lost his patience. Under the pen name Taobao Estate Ruined My Life, he wrote over a hundred bad reviews for the Matching Scroll on the Cultivation Device Rankings, each of which was over a thousand words long and spoke vividly of his own experiences, then lambasted Ma Yun for creating such a thing.

What he hadn’t expected was that, because his writings were so impassioned and dramatic, everyone started following his updates with great fervor—just to watch the show, of course. Some shopkeeper in the black markets even copied out all his reviews and bound them into a book. Since they were first sold out of a small tea stall, the shopkeeper took his naming inspiration from his surroundings. The titles went like this:

The Tea on Me and My Beautiful Dad

The Tea on Me and My Pretty Cousin

And so on and so forth.

Everyone loved juicy gossip. *The Tea* series soon became the hottest-selling illicit title on the market. They all hoped Mister Taobao Estate Ruined My Life would go on as many blind dates as possible, to better entertain the public.

Thankfully, Jiang Xi swiftly stopped the sale of these books. His face when he laid eyes on the offending tome was a threat in and of itself. “What kind of nonsense is this? Burn them.”

“Yes, Sect Leader!”

The toadying disciples of Guyueye bought all the copies of *The Tea* series on the market, dug a hole on the outskirts of Yangzhou, dumped them in, and set a torch to the lot of them.

The Tea had been burnt to cinders, but the Matching Scroll was only growing more popular by the day. Enraged, Xue Meng wrote a secret missive under his own name and furiously cussed out the hardworking, cute, and very innocent Master Ma over ten ink-splattered pages.

The gist was as follows: *Ma Yun, you'd better get your act together! If you don't give me a satisfying answer, Sisheng Peak will cut all ties with Taobao Estate. Good luck getting my shizun's blueprints then!*

The hardworking, cute, and very innocent Master Ma had been happily counting his coin when he received this message. When he read its contents, he nearly died of shock. *Please, heavens no!*

Sisheng Peak cutting ties was no big deal; that the letter's author was Xue Meng was no big deal either. What cut Master Ma to the core was the revelation that a customer was dissatisfied with his masterpiece. So *The Tea wasn't* a series of stories made up by Guyueye to slander his work and take control of the market!

Master Ma was hurt. Master Ma was sad, and a little depressed. He wouldn't allow any of his clients to be displeased with his painstakingly crafted Matching Scroll.

Thus, Master Ma activated his ultimate trump card: his Supportive, Motivated, and Informative Listening Experts.

This was the name of a group of hand-selected Taobao Estate disciples, mostly well-trained and pretty young ladies with sweet voices. The mission Master Ma gave them was "to make a customer smile with one conversation."

The SMILE Squad for short.

Seeing that Xue Meng was so upset, the responsible and diligent Master Ma made the matter his first priority. He commanded the estate's SMILE elder Bu Shenqi[4] to visit Sisheng Peak in person to soothe Sect Leader Xue's ruffled feathers.

In short, she had a single objective: Do everything possible to improve Xue Meng's opinion of the product and satisfy the customer.

Sadly, the recently appointed SMILE elder Bu Shenqi didn't possess Master Ma's penetrating insight. She was a young, dainty, and above all

cowardly cultivator who happened to be terrified of Xue Meng, a man who'd once come out second on the Young Master Ego Ranking. She really didn't want to get beaten up by Sect Leader Xue…pretty please…

Distraught, Miss Bu confessed her plight to a cultivator she'd recently connected with through the Matching Scroll.

She couldn't be faulted for letting the information slip. Her match, a cultivator who went by the name Mileage Mei Vary, was simply the perfect listener—gentle and mature while still being interesting, without giving the too-slick impression of a player. The cultivator's flirting walked the fine line between desperate and disinterested, measured out like a cup of tea kept at the perfect temperature: extremely understanding and eager to assist.

The moment Mileage Mei Vary heard of Miss Bu's difficulties, a message lit up on her scroll: *Don't worry, I'll deal with this for you.*

Bu Shenqi was overcome with emotion. "Really?"

Mileage-xianzhang sounded just as sweet and caring as always. *Of course. My word is as good as gold. Leave Xue-zhangmen to me—I'll make him behave.*

That day, as Xue Meng was personally sweeping the Red Lotus Pavilion, a disciple rushed in with a report. "Sect Leader! There's a representative here from Taobao Estate!"

That name itself was enough to give Xue Meng a splitting headache. He wiped down one of Chu Wanning's tools and tossed it into the bamboo holder, enraged. "Tell him to get the hell out!"

"I-it's a lady!"

"So what?" If the dates he'd gone on had taught Xue Meng one thing, it was that gender was meaningless—when somebody was being a pain in the ass, they were all the damn same. "Then tell *her* to get the hell out! I won't accept any sales pitches from Taobao Estate ever again. They can give up now!"

He turned away to wipe down Chu Wanning's qin stand. "And tell her I have a message for Ma Yun—I'll *never* work with him again, even if it

means going to Jiang Yechen instead! He can try to manufacture whatever the hell he wants!”

The poor little disciple, having borne the brunt of his sect leader’s fury, spoke again in a very small voice. “B-but she said she’s one of Taobao Estate’s SMILE Squad.”

“SMILE Squad?” Xue Meng frowned. “What do they do?”

“Apologize, apparently…” The disciple swallowed, reciting the words he’d been told to convey: “‘Beat me however you wish, I won’t mind. Please take out your temper on me however you want.’ She says she’ll only leave once you’re smiling.”

Xue Meng blinked. What was this girl, one of those practice dummies on the training field?

For all his grousing, Xue Meng reluctantly agreed to go see her. She’d come to apologize, after all.

When he stepped inside Loyalty Hall, an unfamiliar young lady was waiting for him. Her white-and-gold robes whispered over the floor as she moved, and her golden brown curls were held in place with pale jade pins. Her skin was brighter than snow, radiant even in the dimness of the room.

Xue Meng found her crouched low, playing with Veggiebun, Madam Wang’s orange cat. Shockingly, the fat, haughty cat seemed to love her—not only had he presented the snowy softness of his belly for her inspection, he’d narrowed his eyes and was purring in satisfaction.

Hearing him approach, Miss Smile turned and rose smoothly to her feet. The smile she favored him with was perfectly gentle and sweet. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Xue-zhangmen.”

Xue Meng stared. Why did this woman look familiar? He studied her and found no sign of an illusory sachet or any spell that might give him that sense of déjà vu.

Yet she did look similar to someone he knew. She possessed fair skin and light hair, as well as pale eyes. Her features were particularly fine, breathtakingly so—and though her beauty should’ve made her look unapproachably distant, her eyes were expressive and full of mirth. Her gaze was beguiling, but not overly provocative.

Xue Meng was unnaturally picky when it came to looks. Never in his life had he acknowledged any woman as beautiful save for his own mother, Madam Wang. But it had to be said: This Taobao disciple—although not quite as good-looking as himself—wasn't half bad.

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The two of them regarded each other across the hall. Just as Miss Smile made to speak again, Xue Meng raised a hand. “Hold it right there.”

He strode back toward the disciple who’d brought him the message. “You, come here.”

As soon as he shuffled over, Xue Meng lowered his voice to a whisper. “You say this person came here to apologize? *Just* to apologize?”

Confused, the disciple stammered. “Y-yes.”

Xue Meng’s expression was grave. “Do you think Ma Yun’s trying to honey trap me? Maybe he’s using an underhanded trick to keep me from speaking out on behalf of the victims of the Matching Scroll.”

Aren’t you the only victim? thought the disciple. *Everyone else is having a good time, and* The Tea *series is a hoot!* But this he kept to himself. He was still interested in staying alive, after all.

Clenching his fist, the disciple encouraged Xue Meng. “Sect Leader, justice reigns eternal, even if it does sometimes come late. So what if he sent a honey trap—you’d remain the unshakable Xue-zhangmen even if Ma Yun used all Thirty-Six Stratagems!”[5]

Gratified and deeply moved, Xue Meng patted the disciple on the shoulder. “You’re right! Just as true gold fears no fire, temptation is nothing to a man of morals! She can try every trick she’s got, it won’t change my mind! I’ll give her the cold shoulder and nitpick her behavior until she gives up and leaves Sisheng Peak!”

He turned back to the young lady. “Miss, what’s your name?”

“Me?” The girl’s lips curved softly. “This humble one’s name is unimportant. Xue-zhangmen may refer to me simply as S.”

“S-sure!” Still vigilant, Xue Meng waved a hand. “But you won’t change my opinion of the Matching Scroll. If that’s why you’ve come, you can leave now. Let’s not waste each other’s time.”

But Miss S didn’t take it personally. She was completely unfazed, and her smile widened. “The apology is only part of it. Out of all the SMILE disciples of Taobao Estate, I was the one who *asked* to come to Sisheng Peak. Not just because of the Matching Scroll, but also…”

The way those pale eyes lingered on Xue Meng brought back his sense of déjà vu. He felt like a mouse watched by a cat; the hairs on his back stood up, and a creeping sense of danger warned him he might be pranked at any moment.

Just as he bristled, ready to have her dragged off the mountain, Miss S smiled again. That expression contained the utmost charm, allure tucked into the upturned corners of her lips. “Because Xue-zhangmen is the most outstanding, most righteous, most generous, most saucy—”

“Huh?”

“Um, most glossy cultivator in the cultivation world.” She beamed. “I’ve admired you for a long time. I came here for you specifically.”

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Xue Mengmeng’s Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 11

AS FAR AS XUE MENG was concerned, he had no need of female companionship.

But he also thought everything Miss S said was the perfect truth. How could he find fault with a woman with such a discerning eye? Only a boor would strike someone smiling so pleasantly at them—and this young lady was not only smiling, but genuine and demure. Xue Meng couldn’t bring himself to send her away, so he had no choice but to let her stay at Sisheng Peak and allow her to “represent, by word and deed, the utmost sincerity of Ma-zhuangzhu’s apology to Xue-zhangmen.”

A few days passed in this manner. Miss S remained exceedingly tactful. She never put herself in Xue Meng’s line of sight without his express permission; rather, she passed her time ably and quietly helping out around the sect.

And Sisheng Peak did need a lot of helping hands. After the last great battle, the sect’s fame had skyrocketed, yet they still retained a penchant for taking on missions like helping old Grandma Wang’s cat down from a tree.

In Xue Meng’s youth, it had been Shi Mei who’d handled trifles like this, or sometimes Mo Ran if he was free. Once Xue Meng had taken up the sect leader’s mantle, however, he’d wanted all his disciples to truly understand that kindness had no hierarchy. He asked all twenty elders of Sisheng Peak to take turns assigning these minor tasks to their disciples. This month, it happened to be Tanlang’s turn.

The Tanlang Elder had the fewest disciples in the sect aside from Chu Wanning. And he seemed to select his disciples in his own bizarre image, so every one of his students was as persnickety as he. Tromping down the mountain to help Grandma Wang with her cat was by no means their preferred work, but it wasn’t as if they could refuse the sect leader’s orders. Usually they’d pick one of Xuanji’s weaker disciples and bully or bribe

them into handling those trifling appointments on their behalf. Xuanji, mild as he was, had given Tanlang an earful about the matter more than once.

But now that Miss S was here, everything changed. Somehow, she charmed Tanlang's disciples into action with hardly more than a few words; they not only willingly went down the mountain to help, but were suddenly terribly happy to do so.

And she didn't stop there: Miss S could be found at various times helping the ladies at Mengpo Hall with the cooking, cleaning the stone lions at Naihe Bridge, organizing the records in the library… She was happy to do anything at all, and whatever she did, she did well. Anything that breathed, from the sect's own elders to Mengpo Hall's dog and Madam Wang's cat, had only one thing to say about her: "Amazing!" Miss S embodied the wisdom and maturity any sect's da-shijie should possess.

By the third day, Xue Meng couldn't take it anymore. This woman was incredibly competent—in fact, he could learn a thing or two from her with respect to managing the sect. But he was far too proud to discuss such things with a girl who wasn't even from his sect.

As he sat in the garden, lost in these thoughts, he caught a snatch of conversation from the cultivators walking through the open-air corridors.

"Miss S is a real stunner," said one disciple. "Ah, how long do you think she's staying at Sisheng Peak? If she's gonna be here for a few months, I'll take my shot!"

The other disciple rolled her eyes. "You're a frog, she's a swan. Anyway, can't you tell Miss S has a thing for our sect leader?"

Xue Meng startled. As the disciples turned the corner, he swiftly raised the sword manual he was holding to cover his face—though his ears were pricked and listening.

"Huh? Really?"

"Are you dumb? Listen to her sometime when she talks to other people. Doesn't she always make it about Xue-zhangmen? I don't think she's just here to help the sect. She's got two other missions."

"What missions?"

The disciple started counting on her fingers. “Number one: praise Xue-zhangmen. Number two: learn about Xue-zhangmen. Her praise is totally baseless, obviously. She says he’s more handsome than Mo-zongshi, smarter than Ma-zhuangzhu, more likely to get rich than Jiang Yechen, and kinder than even Chu-zongshi. Most importantly, she says his height and build are exceptional. Say, do you think she might be blind?”

Xue Meng was incensed. *She’s telling the absolute truth! You’re the one who’s blind!*

“And she asks about everything, from the sect leader’s favorite foods to his current mood. Yesterday, I saw her asking what the sect leader thinks of Mei Hanxue.”

“Huh? Why would she care about that?”

“Because Mei-da-shixiong’s his childhood friend, of course! Everyone knows the way to a man’s heart is through his friends. I think Miss S is serious about him, so you’d better give up. Competing with the sect leader? You think you have a chance?”

Still chattering, the two wandered into the distance, leaving Xue Meng with his feet rooted to the ground, slowly lowering the sword manual from his face.

Although Miss S wasn’t as good-looking as he was, she was still an extraordinary girl in many ways. And if she’d been praising him *that* much…

Asking her to dinner and spending some time talking to her about how to manage a sect…probably wouldn’t be too embarrassing, right? After all, she did have very good taste.

Steeling his resolve, Xue Meng asked around and learned Miss S was currently in the library. He fixed his clothes and cleared his throat, then headed over.

At that very moment, inside the library, Miss S of Taobao Estate—Bu Shenqi’s lifesaver and master of disguise, Mister Mileage Mei Vary—who was actually the number one philanderer of the cultivation world and da-

shixiong of Kunlun Taxue Palace, Mei Hanxue, was engrossed in a book entitled *Ancient Barrier Formations*.

This particular volume had once sat in Chu Wanning's Red Lotus Pavilion. After Chu Wanning had gone into seclusion on Nanping Mountain, he'd asked Xue Meng to move his books into the library so all the disciples could access them. Alongside *Ancient Barrier Formations* was *Herbal Compendium*, *Sichuan Travelogue*, and *Qin Scores of Rufeng Sect in Linyi*, among others.

As a music cultivator, Mei Hanxue wasn't all that interested in barrier techniques. He should've been reading the book on Rufeng Sect's qin music, yet he had his nose buried in this esoteric tome instead. From time to time, he stroked his chin and nodded, smiling, as if in deep appreciation.

But of course, it was no surprise that he appreciated it—that copy of *Ancient Barrier Formations* contained a sprawling collection of erotic illustrations.

Mei Hanxue was a clever man. After quickly realizing these paintings could have nothing to do with Chu Wanning, another few moments of thought led him to the correct answer. These scintillating portraits must surely have been inscribed by Mo Ran's youthful pen. They were nothing short of exhilarating, the scenes they depicted impossibly imaginative.

Mo Ran, it appeared, had been a very inventive young man. With all of Mei Hanxue's experience in the field of love, regular erotica no longer piqued his interest. Mister Mo Weiyu's adolescent works, however, shook him to the core. What was even more astounding was the fact that this man had drawn such filth all over Chu Wanning's books and still drew breath. A rare specimen indeed. As he flipped the pages, Mei Hanxue couldn't help but burst out laughing.

Mo Weiyu was one fascinating character. And Xue Meng, having spent so many years at his side yet managing to stay so pure, was even more so.

Being interesting was one of the most essential requirements for capturing Mei Hanxue's attention, and from the moment he'd met Xue Meng, he'd found him incomparably fascinating. To Mei Hanxue, Xue Meng was too impulsive, too naïve, and too often forgetful. He was like a pufferfish: If Mei Hanxue patted the little creature from where he sat on the

shore, it’d instantly puff up in rage—but soon it would foolishly forget the whole thing and go back to swishing through the water.

And Mei Hanxue was like a curious cat: He couldn’t resist batting at the little fish whenever he got the chance, then swiping at him the next time too. The more puffed-up Xue Meng was, the happier Mei Hanxue became.

Once, when Xue Meng had truly reached the end of his patience, he’d asked, “Honestly, Mei Hanxue, do you have a grudge against me in particular?”

You’re the son of my benefactor, thought Mei Hanxue. *Of course not. But there’s a certain incident I’m sure you’ve forgotten.*

In fact, when they’d first met as children, Xue Meng had done something impossibly dickish: He’d bullied Mei Hanxue into dressing like a girl.

At the time, Mei Hanxue had still been a round-cheeked and stubby-legged little kid who had come to Sisheng Peak with his shizun Ming Yuelou. It had been the depths of winter, and he’d gone everywhere in a white fur hat and thick coat. The hat had been slightly too big and was always sliding down, covering not just his golden hair but his jade-green eyes. The young Xue Meng thus hadn’t immediately noticed a foreign-looking little disciple in the group’s midst.

It had been Mei Hanxue’s first time visiting a different sect. He was young and new to everything. Worried he’d be made fun of for his Suyab accent, he’d kept as quiet as he could, standing in the corner with his pale gold lashes lowered—a far cry from the magnetic presence he would become in the future.

How, then, had this grudge formed?

The blame lay squarely on the thick mist shrouding Sisheng Peak’s Melodic Springs.

Hot springs were everywhere in the mountains around Kunlun Taxue Palace. The sect’s disciples were used to bathing in them, not in wooden tubs, and Mei Hanxue was no different. That night, he had planned to visit Melodic Springs for a bath with Mei Hänxue, who’d taken on the appearance of a boy from the Central Plains. But at the last minute, Mei Hänxue had disappeared, leaving Mei Hanxue to bathe alone.

He stripped off his outer robe, leaving only his snow-silk underclothes. Mei Hanxue didn't know where he should put his discarded clothes, so he stacked them on his head and walked over petal-strewn pebbles toward the water.

As he drew close, a piping yet resonant voice reached his ears.

"You should spend some more time in the sun, Shi Mei. Look how small you are, how pale your skin is, then look at *me*. Don't I look more manly? You look like a girl. Ah, I'm scared you'll grow up to look like that guy Uncle…Uncle Wu, the one who sells meat pastries down in Wuchang Town. He's not even as tall as his wife!"

There came a softer reply. "Shaozhu, of course you look the best. How could I compare myself to you?"

Mei Hanxue hadn't been completely fluent in Chinese at that time. If he'd known *shaozhu* meant young master, he'd have understood that this boy was the son of his benefactors. Unfortunately, he instead drew the conclusion that the boy's name was Shaozhu.

Xue Meng couldn't have been more pleased at the compliment. "Shi Mei," he said encouragingly. "I love your honesty. I'm sure you'll grow big and tall too! Just do as I do. When I go in the sun, you should come with me, and when I drink milk, you'll drink too! Don't lose hope!"

"But I'm worried that—"

"Aiya, what's there to worry about? It'll happen when it happens. And if you *do* end up as short as Uncle Wu in the worst case, I'll protect you! Just hide behind me in a fight, okay?"

Shi Mei couldn't help laughing. "Then I'll thank you in advance, Shaozhu."

"No need to be so polite. We're sect siblings, after all."

As Mei Hanxue crept closer, his vision cleared. Two kids around his own age were soaking in the flower-filled hot springs. One was slender and beautiful, his skin as fair as pear-blossom petals, while the other stood with his back toward him. Mei Hanxue couldn't see his face, but he found to his consternation that even in the bath, this young lad was wearing a shiny silver Sisheng Peak hair crown, fastened with a jade pin. Had he forgotten

to take it off, or had he kept it on purposely? Was everyone from Sichuan this weird…

Before he could finish the thought, Shi Mei's vigilant eyes fell upon him. At the sight of an unfamiliar face, he said, "Shaozhu, is this…?"

The other boy turned.

Mei Hanxue's and Xue Meng's eyes met for the first time.

Their encounter was truly an accident of fate. The mist rising from Melodic Springs thickened just as Xue Meng turned around. Mei Hanxue got a good look at his face, but Xue Meng wasn't so fortunate. All he saw was fair skin, large eyes, and fine features—like those of a little girl.

It just so happened that this was right around the time several female disciples had been caught spying on Chu Wanning in the bath, and the incidents were the first thing that popped into Xue Meng's head. With a yelp, he raised his voice and shouted, "Come, now! This is ridiculous! Again?! Get the pervert! Get the pervert right now!"

Even as he was tackled to the ground and dragged out of the hot springs, Mei Hanxue still didn't understand. Huh…? What made him a pervert? In Sichuan, was it inappropriate for boys to bathe with boys they didn't know?

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Xue Mengmeng's Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 12

THE INCIDENT HAD BEEN pure chaos, and it'd happened so long ago even Mei Hanxue didn't remember all the details clearly. In short, his unfamiliarity with the language and stuttering speech meant he hadn't been able to explain himself, and everyone thought he *was* a little pervert trying to sneak a peek at the young master in the bath. The Sisheng Peak disciples who'd caught him, brimming with righteous fire, had tossed him into Yanluo Hall to reflect on his behavior.

In the mess, Mei Hanxue's own clothes had been lost in Melodic Springs and were nowhere to be found. With his golden hair loose around his shoulders and his green eyes wide with exasperation, he stood inside the reflection hall and stared at the words *A loyal heart remains constant* inscribed on the mounted plaque, completely flummoxed as to what he'd done wrong.

After a while, one of Sisheng Peak's senior disciples brought him new clothes, supposedly from "Shaozhu." With them came a book.

Mei Hanxue unfolded the garments and discovered they were a set of female disciple's robes. To add insult to injury, the book was a copy of *Maidenly Virtues*.

He fell silent.

Mei Hanxue was truly a patient boy, very slow to anger. At this point, however, he'd had enough. He knew that Suyab, Taxue Palace, and Sichuan all had their own customs. For example, he abhorred pork, but before they'd left, his shizun Ming Yuelou had warned them that people came in all kinds, and one man's trash might be another's treasure. Since he'd arrived, Mei Hanxue had paid a great deal of attention to the habits of people from Sichuan, and he would *never* tell a person from the Central Plains happily munching on roast pig trotter that it was disgusting. Even if he was privately grossed out, he'd politely pass the salt and pepper, then go home and wash his hands a hundred times.

But this mysterious Shaozhu was a little tyrant. Never mind welcoming a guest with pleasure—he'd given him girl's clothes and a copy of *Maidenly Virtues* to humiliate him on purpose. Hadn't he just gone to the wrong bathing spot? Couldn't they talk it out? Did he have to handle things so cruelly?

The foreigner Mei Hanxue, on his first time out in the world, had no clue where he'd gone wrong, nor had he the patience to figure it out. It was bitterly cold in the hall, and all he had on was a thin inner robe splattered in mud. Despite the humiliation, he had too much sense not to drape Shaozhu's gifted robes around his shoulders and tie up his damp golden tresses, leaving a few errant locks loose around his pale cheeks.

As for the book, he reduced it to ash. When the fire flickered to life, Mei Hanxue thought to himself with no small vindictiveness that he'd surely remember this humiliation, and if he got his hands on Shaozhu, he'd definitely wring the kid's neck!

A new awkwardness came the morning after.

Ming Yuelou had instructed him and his older brother Mei Hänxue to take turns with their true faces. After hearing what'd happened, Mei Hänxue had gone to Yanluo Hall in search of him. He found his little brother sitting in the corner like a disheveled little girl, clothes haphazardly put on and face gloomy with suffering.

"What kind of getup is this?"

"Ge," said Mei Hanxue. "It's your getup for the day."

His brother stared at him.

"Here, I've enjoyed it all night. The clothes smell pretty good. Your turn."

"Mei Hanxue!" snapped his brother. "What kind of trouble have you gotten me into *this* time?!"

Sometimes, Mei Hanxue did feel bad for his brother. Perhaps Mei Hänxue's luck was not very good—every time Mei Hanxue stumbled into some kind of mishap, it was always Mei Hänxue who had to deal with the fallout. Today was no different.

Although Mei Hanxue had suffered having to sit next to a fire all night in Yanluo Hall dressed in girl's clothes, the horrors Shaozhu was about to put his brother through were much worse. The overseers of Yanluo Hall had scheduled him for a full day of cleaning in the library.

When Mei Hänxue put on that blue-and-silver girl's uniform, Mei Hanxue could tell he was on the verge of going insane. Mei Hanxue promised himself once again: If he got his hands on Shaozhu, he'd kill the little brat.

After hearing the whole story, his older brother helpfully removed the word *if*. "Wait for me," hissed Mei Hänxue. "We'll kill him as soon as I'm done with the books."

With that, he toddled off to the library.

A few brash and arrogant shixiong of Kunlun Taxue Palace had come to Sisheng Peak with Ming Yuelou. All of them despised Mei Hanxue for the clear favoritism the sect leader showed him, and the worst of the lot was delighted to hear Mei-shidi had been punished by Sisheng Peak. He scuttled off to the library the moment he heard what had happened.

As soon as he caught sight of Mei-shidi perched atop a wooden ladder, dressed in girl's clothes and wiping off books with a shuttered expression, he burst out laughing and summoned his little gang to watch the show.

"Mei-shidi…oops, I mean, Mei-shimei, you sure look pretty today!"

"What did you do to the Sisheng Peak people for them to dress you so nicely?!"

"Quick, tell me who it was." A fit of snorted laughter. "Shige will go give them flowers right now!"

Mei Hänxue was aloof and spoke little. Annoyed, he didn't bother refuting them—instead he whirled around and attacked. But he was too young, and too unskilled, and outnumbered to boot. Mei Hänxue ended up pinned to the ground by the insufferable pests he called his sect siblings.

"What's your problem? You're all sweet and cheerful one day and start punching people the next. Shixiong can help fix that for you."

“Get him out of those robes—he’s from Taxue Palace; why the hell’s he in Sisheng Peak’s uniform?”

The shrill sound of a blade unsheathing cut through the tussle. A glinting scimitar flew past their noses and buried itself in the wooden floorboards. Shocked, the Kunlun Taxue goblins scattered like birds.

“X-Xue Meng?” one of them gasped.

The boy who stood with his arms crossed at the library doors had a handsome face and an arrogant set to his chin. He was dressed in a full complement of Sisheng Peak’s blue-and-silver armor with his hair pulled into a high ponytail, impatiently tapping his black-gloved fingers against his arms. “Bullying people at Sisheng Peak? Do you have my dad’s permission? Mine? My shizun’s?”

No one dared answer.

“Get the hell out!”

Those shixiong only picked on kids weaker than themselves. If nothing else, Xue Meng was the son of the sect leader—none of them had the courage to oppose him. They ran off like rats, bowing and scraping.

Stony-faced, Xue Meng stepped forward, steel-toed boots clicking against the floorboards. He took hold of Longcheng’s hilt and tugged, planning to yank it out in one smooth, cool move, but it didn’t budge.

Mei Hänxue blinked. So did Xue Meng.

Clearing his throat, Xue Meng wrapped both his hands more firmly around the hilt. Only then did he manage to extract the scimitar, which rivaled his small body in height.

He turned to Mei Hänxue, still sitting on the ground, but failed to recognize him as the pervert from Melodic Springs. And of course Mei Hänxue didn’t recognize him either.

They stared at each other for a moment in silence. Xue Meng noted the boy’s messy golden hair, bloodied lip, and the total destruction of his clothes—leaving him in only a single Kunlun Taxue snow-silk undergarment. He scratched his head, bewildered. “Little bro, you were fighting with your own sect? That’s not right.” He whipped off his own outer robe, hem fluttering, and wrapped it around Mei Hänxue.

Mei Hänxue looked up at him. The little boy didn't look much like his benefactor Xue Zhengyong: His features were delicate, his small nose turned up and his almond eyes sparkling. An innate sense of superiority radiated from him.

Mei Hänxue was a bit confused. "You're…Xue Meng?"

"Yep," said Xue Meng, smug. "What did you think? Wasn't that impressive? Were you thinking the rumors don't do me justice?"

So this *was* his benefactor's son. Mei Hänxue was about to stand up and thank him when Xue Meng burst out laughing and bragged, "Your shaozhu has never lost a fight!"

There was a moment of silence.

"*You're* Shaozhu?"

Xue Meng looked at him. "Huh? Who else would I be?"

"Shaozhu isn't someone's name?" asked Mei Hanxue in surprise later that night. "Since when was he our benefactor's son?"

Mei Hänxue was more mature than his brother. He dug out the Suyab–Kunlun Chinese dictionary from their packs, and they huddled together, studying it by candlelight.

"*Shaozhu*," read Mei Hanxue. "Meaning: young master. When an adult is the present master, it refers to the young person selected—or predetermined, depending on the country or the clan involved—to be their heir."

Mei Hanxue and Mei Hänxue were both rendered speechless.

After a long moment, Mei Hanxue asked the question they were both thinking. "Are we still gonna kill him?"

His elder brother thought it over for a long moment. He glanced at the robe still draped around his shoulders, then lowered those pale gold lashes. "What do you think?" he asked coldly.

Mei Hanxue nodded, his jade-green eyes shining like an exotic cat's. "Okay. I'll play with him. I won't beat his ass."

Mei Hänxue said nothing.

“But I can tease him a little bit, can’t I? You *saw* what he did to me yesterday.”

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Mei Hänxue thought it over and spoke three words of warning. “Don’t overdo it.”

After this incident, Mei Hanxue played with Xue Meng often. Slowly, the two became friends.

Mei Hanxue thought Xue Meng was an idiot. He and his brother were obviously taking turns playing with him, but Xue Meng never thought anything of it beyond declaring his moods erratic. Instead, it was the little shidi named Xue Ya who often dogged Xue Meng’s heels who seemed to notice something; Mei Hanxue caught the boy watching him thoughtfully more than once.

Mei Hanxue didn’t like clever observers like Xue Ya. People like Xue Meng, who swaggered around as bold as a crab but had very little going on upstairs, suited him much better. Teasing him was loads of fun.

The only problem was—

“You’re not sleeping with me tonight!”

“Huh?” Mei Hanxue was dressed in his snow-silk pajamas, clutching his bamboo pillow with his golden locks flowing loose around his shoulders and his seawater eyes wide and guileless. “Why?”

Xue Meng was spitting mad. “Because you kicked me out of bed in the middle of the night yesterday! Did you forget?”

Mei Hanxue pressed his lips shut. Didn’t his brother say he wouldn’t bully Xue Meng? What was he doing kicking him out of bed?

But a moment later, he grinned. Mei Hanxue hadn’t hit his growth spurt yet; he didn’t boast the dazzling good looks he would later possess, but the brilliance of that smile already hinted at the future Mei-gongzi’s charm. “I swear I won’t do it tonight. I’ll sleep on the outer edge of the bed, and if you’re still worried, I’ll sleep with you in my arms.”

I-in his arms? The mental image stopped Xue Meng in his tracks. He tossed a tiger-shaped pillow at him. “Ah! What’s wrong with you Kunlun people?! Get the hell out!”

The memory of it still made Mei Hanxue laugh. As he chuckled with a hand to his mouth, the door creaked open. He looked up and saw Xue Meng silhouetted against the light, brash and arrogant yet somehow a little awkward as he strode toward him.

“Ahem… Um, hey, you.”

Mei Hanxue wasn’t put off by his rudeness. Smiling, he lowered the leg that’d been propped up on the bookshelf and sat up straight. “Sect Leader.”

Xue Meng cleared his throat, glancing at him. Slowly, his face reddened.

The smile froze on Mei Hanxue’s face.

He’d seen his fair share of the world—it wasn’t rare for cultivators to flush at the sight of him, male and female alike. He knew better than anyone what that meant. But he’d never thought Xue Meng would look at the cross-dressing version of himself that way. The Xue Ziming he knew wasn’t that kind of man; he was haughty, straightforward, with beauty in spades but lacking in brains. He’d never known how to make a girl happy, and his second favorite activity after training was probably preening before his own reflection.

Blushing at a *girl*? What was *wrong* with him? Even though this girl was himself, dressed this way on a lark, Mei Hanxue still felt unsettled.

He was suddenly reminded of the snow-white Persian cat he’d once raised at Taxue Palace. He’d raised it from a kitten and thought of it as a cute and dumb little cat that would stay cute and dumb forever. That was until the day he saw his adorable pet mating with a stray. And not just one—at least two on top of each other, with a third sitting a little ways off, watching the shocking display. Mei Hanxue didn’t know if it was getting ready to join in or merely a horrified witness.

Perhaps the third cat wasn’t horrified, but Mei Hanxue certainly was. He had no idea where his cute, naïve, and silly little kitten had gone.

Facing this blushing Xue Meng, Mei Hanxue felt the exact same way. As Xue Meng’s expression became more and more pinched—Mei Hanxue could see him biting his lip again and again as he hesitated to speak—he started to wonder how he’d gently yet politely reject Sect Leader Xue.

Should he say Miss S preferred women, or tell him she was terminally ill and would be dead in a few months?

Excuses came easily to his lips when rejecting female cultivators. He made them almost as often as he breathed and could spin the wildest stories with the most vivid conviction…yet now, he was somehow at a loss.

Distraught, he heard Sect Leader Xue finally find his voice. “Um… about…”

Mei Hanxue listened, tense.

“Um, it’s been a while since you’ve come to Sisheng Peak. I…had a question for you.”

“Of course, Sect Leader. Go ahead.” Mei Hanxue looked composed, but his mind was reeling. Say he was a lesbian, or that he was dying of a terminal disease? Lesbian or dying?

“I, I wanted to ask…”

“Hm?”

“Ugh.” Gritting his teeth, Xue Meng stamped his foot and made up his mind—risking his pride, he clenched his fists, raised his voice, and said, “Will you please tell me how you rub Veggiebun’s belly without getting scratched?!”

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Xue Mengmeng's Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 13

MEI HANXUE LOOKED at Xue Meng, who was as red as a blazing sunset. He couldn't help but raise his brows. "Is that all?"

"Um…" Xue Meng scratched his head, then remembered something else that had puzzled him. "Also, how did you get Tanlang and Xuanji's disciples to stop fighting?"

Mei Hanxue stared. Sorry—apparently, he had overestimated Xue Meng. Mei Hanxue had met thousands upon thousands of people, but Xue Meng had a unique talent. Sect Leader Xue obviously remained single through sheer power of will.

Regardless, Mei Hanxue patiently explained to Xue Meng how he'd mediated conflicts between Tanlang and Xuanji's disciples, and also began to instruct Xue Meng in the art of petting cats.

"The more you indulge a cat, the less seriously he'll take you," Mei Hanxue said with a smile. Her expression was kind, her voice soft and gentle, yet she retained a vaguely flippant, coquettish air. "Sect Leader, you mustn't give in just because he's cute. You need to show him who's boss, even bully him a bit. He needs to know he can't escape. Then this fuzzy little guy will learn to obey."

"What if he wants to run away?"

"Chase him," Mei Hanxue answered, smiling.

"What if he doesn't want to play?"

"Restrain him."

"What if he bites you?"

"Smack him."

Xue Meng glanced at Mei Hanxue's cheerful face. For some reason, the hairs on the back of his neck rose slightly. He swallowed. "You haven't been smacking Veggiebun, have you?"

Mei Hanxue snorted with laughter. “I’m just teasing you. No, I always let them come to me. I’d never force myself on anyone—even a cat.”

Xue Meng let out a breath of relief. He had been about to deem this Miss S quite frightening.

Mei Hanxue raised pale lashes, revealing those alluring irises, green and depthless. “Sect Leader, speaking of which, Taobao Estate does have a secret cat-petting technique. Would you like to learn?”

As a martial arts fanatic, Xue Meng was extremely interested in all kinds of so-called secret techniques. Mo Ran had once hypothesized that if someone really wanted to convince the pure and artless Xue Ziming to read an erotic book, all they’d have to do was slap on a title like *Illustrated Secret Techniques for the Bedroom*, *Ten Weird Lovemaking Tricks Healers Don’t Want You to Know*, or *Top-Secret Scrolls of the Red Lotus Pavilion*… Ahem, actually—regarding this last one, Xue Meng probably wouldn’t read it even if it did have “secret” in the title.

“Shall I teach you?” Mei Hanxue gave him a patient smile. “Normally I wouldn’t offer, but I truly admire the sect leader.”

Xue Meng was unable to resist the dual temptation of the kitty’s white belly *and* a secret technique. Curiosity piqued, he cautiously took the bait. “I see… Then—s-sure, tell me more.”

“Okay, listen carefully. First of all, you have to understand feline nature,” said Mei Hanxue, observing Xue Meng intently. “As the saying goes, curiosity killed the cat. A cat’s biggest weakness is the fact that he always wants to know more, without being mindful of the danger.”

Xue Meng’s eyes were wide and eager. “Really?”

“Yup.” Mei Hanxue lifted a long, slender finger. “You see, if you hold your finger in front of a cat, he’ll almost always come over and sniff it. Then, when the cat is close, you can grab him. Pin him to the ground, lift his legs, and he’ll start mewling away…”

Mei Hanxue had chosen those suggestive words deliberately, hoping to get a rise out of Xue Meng. Unfortunately, even the best-laid plans often go awry. The profligate Mei Hanxue had underestimated the extent of Xue Meng’s naivete; the implication flew completely over his head. Xue Meng

listened with an expression of intense concentration, then leaned forward. “But won’t that make him mad?”

Mei Hanxue hesitated; he’d missed his mark, but he wasn’t discouraged. “That’s right,” he said, still smiling.

“What then?”

“Comfort him.”

Xue Meng waved a hand. “It won’t work, he doesn’t understand what we’re saying.”

“Words are empty—action is what counts,” said Mei Hanxue. “As long as the cat’s enjoying himself, he won’t resist. He’ll look at you with big, soft eyes, and he’ll roll around into the most comfortable positions to give you better access. He’ll even make happy little noises… Have you ever tried it?”

Xue Meng stroked his chin contemplatively. “Like purring?” He made a little *mrrp* sound in his throat.

As Mei Hanxue gazed at Xue Meng’s unsuspecting face, the urge to tease him only grew stronger. He couldn’t help but chuckle. “Mm-hmm, exactly, cats will purr.”

“But he never lets me touch his belly. I’ve only ever gotten as far as his chin.”

“That’s a matter of skill. You didn’t find the right spot to make him feel good.” Mei Hanxue’s soft lashes fluttered. After a moment, he said warmly, “Sect Leader, if you don’t mind, may I offer you some hands-on instruction?”

“Uhh…”

Though propriety dictated that men and women should keep their distance, teaching was an exception. Xue Meng looked at Miss S—she seemed every bit a demure, gentle, and respectable girl. After a beat, he nodded. Sichuan folk didn’t make a fuss over small things like this. Then again, the young lady was from Jiangnan, wasn’t she…

Just as Mei Hanxue was about to reach over, Xue Meng blurted, “Hold on! I just want to learn how to pet a cat. To be clear—I’m not trying to take advantage of you in any way.”

Mei Hanxue blinked, then grinned. “Mn.”

“And I mean absolutely no disrespect toward you, miss.”

Mei Hanxue’s ribs ached from holding in his laughter. Tears gathered at the corners of his eyes, and a snicker finally slipped past his lips. “I understand. I’m a disciple of Taobao Estate—we’re a proper sect, you know. We’d never try that kind of scam. A touch or two won’t besmirch my honor. Sect Leader, why are you so nervous?”

Xue Meng awkwardly cleared his throat. “Ahem… Well, please begin, then.”

Mei Hanxue stepped aside, making space for Xue Meng to stand next to him. “First, come closer, Sect Leader.”

Once Xue Meng was in place, Mei Hanxue raised his hand. “See, when you pet a cat, you have to approach him slowly and wait for him to come over and sniff you first,” he said, straight-faced. He reached out until his fingertips hovered just in front of Xue Meng’s nose. After a pause, he lowered his hand until it rested on Xue Meng’s chin. “Then you can give him a couple of gentle scratches. Start slow.”

Mei Hanxue knew Xue Meng too well to do anything more than lightly tap him on the chin. He chuckled to himself—*Aiya, I can’t believe Xue Meng hasn’t hit me yet.*

Perhaps Mei Hanxue’s Miss S act was so prim and proper that Xue Meng didn’t harbor even the shadow of a doubt. He touched his own chin a couple of times. “Like this?”

“A little harder, ideally.”

“How about now?”

“Not always so hard. As the saying goes, ‘Nine shallow, one deep, and they’ll never let you leave.’”

“What kind of saying is that? How come I’ve never heard it?”

Mei Hanxue laughed. “You’d only come across that one in specific types of books.”

Still somewhat doubtful, Xue Meng scratched his own chin a few more times, testing the amount of force. “And then?” he chirped.

“Ah, and then.” Mei Hanxue let his jade-pale fingertips glide downward. They stopped at Xue Meng’s waist, hovering just above the silver lion’s-head buckle of his belt. “Once the cat feels comfortable, he’ll lie down and expose his belly to you. That means he trusts you.”

“So it’s okay to touch it then?”

“Not yet,” Mei Hanxue said blithely. “You have to do what I’m doing—hold your hand right above his belly, but don’t pet him yet. Like this.”

He slowly moved his hand at Xue Meng’s waist, flitting close then drawing away again. Xue Meng squirmed in place, staring at Mei Hanxue’s fingers, not knowing when they would actually touch him. But after a few seconds, as Miss S’s hand continued to vacillate in midair, he slowly let down his guard.

At that moment, Mei Hanxue grabbed him by the waist and pulled him close. “Then, when he least expects it, you have to—”

He didn’t get a chance to finish his sentence. Xue Meng, caught completely by surprise, yelped and stumbled forward. He fell heavily to the ground, bringing Mei Hanxue down with him—and landing squarely on top of the supposed young lady.

Mei Hanxue found himself speechless as Xue Meng sputtered and coughed amidst the clouds of dust sent up from the library floor. Xue Meng looked uncannily like the cat he’d pretended to be—his eyes were glazed with confusion, his face blank. He lay there blinking for a long moment before he realized he had Mei Hanxue pinned to the ground, and the aged floorboards of the library were creaking in protest beneath them.

Xue Meng looked down at the girl under him, her bright hair puddled around her, robes in disarray. Her pale eyes were half-shaded beneath sweeping lashes. She wore a strange expression, as though she wanted to say something but stopped herself. Alarm bells blared in Xue Meng’s head. He tried to scramble to his feet.

Sadly, it was precisely in such urgent situations that people were most likely to make mistakes. Xue Meng was still disoriented, and his knees buckled the first two times he tried to get up. Before he managed it, he ended up grinding against Mei Hanxue a few more times.

Mei Hanxue's brows rose slightly, the look in his eyes growing even more unreadable.

Eventually, and with great difficulty, Xue Meng clambered to his feet. Ears crimson, he stammered, "Uh—D-Dajie, I-I-I'm really sorry about that."

Due to his arrogant personality, Xue Meng had never been close with many women. Girls his age ignored him; it was always older women who were fondest of him. As a result, he'd gotten into the habit of calling women either "Auntie" or "Jie." Now, his nerves had gotten the better of him, and he'd blurted *Dajie* to the beautiful young woman that was Mei Hanxue.

Mei Hanxue looked up at him, gaze inscrutable. He sighed to himself. It was no wonder Xue Meng had never even held a girl's hand. When it came to the fairer sex, those over ninety could be called "Granny," and those under five could be called "Sweetie." For everyone in between, "Beautiful" was the best address. How did Xue Meng not understand such a basic thing at almost thirty years of age?

Above him, Xue Meng was still stammering away. "D-D-Dajie, did I hurt you? I-I'm not that heavy, um, you look pretty sturdy…"

Mei Hanxue blinked. If he'd been a real girl, he would have backhanded Xue Meng solidly across the face by now.

Luckily, Xue Meng seemed to realize that using the word *sturdy* to describe a girl was less than ideal. "Th-that's not what I meant," he said. "I just wanted to say that you don't seem like you'd break so easily, you're pretty tough, uh… I'll stop talking now. Are you okay?"

Mei Hanxue finally sat up, expression complicated. "I'm fine. I was just surprised by your reaction." The two of them sat in awkward silence. "Did I scare you?" Mei Hanxue asked.

"Of—of course not." Xue Meng's face was still beet red. He cast about for something to say. "Is…is that how you tamed Veggiebun too?"

"Yes," Mei Hanxue responded with a smile. "All the creatures I train are very obedient."

"Oh…"

“Sect Leader, do you think you got the hang of it?”

“I guess so…”

“Excellent,” Mei Hanxue said. “As long as you’re happy, Sect Leader, that’s what matters—even a little fall like this is worth it.”

Xue Meng fell silent. Any man would be pleased to hear such tender words spoken to him by a beautiful girl. He stole a couple more glances at Miss S, rather touched. He maintained his low opinion of Ma Yun and the Matching Scroll he’d pulled out of his ass, but his SMILE Squad was pretty great. Miss S was easy-going, goodnatured, unpretentious, honest, and industrious, completely dedicated to her customers’ demands.

Xue Meng used to think these delicate girls were like creatures made of glass—fragile and easy to upset, prone to crying and wailing. If a man knocked them over by accident, they’d pout and stamp their feet, sobbing hysterically, “How dare you! Shameless bastard!” But this Miss S was different. She didn’t seem to mind getting the short end of the stick if she could change Xue Meng’s appraisal of the Matching Scroll. Of course, Xue Meng hadn’t *meant* to give her the short end of the stick. But he had a naturally kind disposition, and felt a twinge of pity for this obedient and hard-working girl.

After some hesitation, Xue Meng suggested, “How about this—it’s almost dinner time. Why don’t I take you out? Th-think of it as a thank-you for teaching me your secret cat-petting technique. And about the Matching Scroll review… It’s not like I’m totally unwilling to discuss it. At any rate, let’s eat first, then talk.”

Xue Meng extended a hand to the diligent Miss S, ready to help her to her feet. But Mei Hanxue didn’t move. His eyes flicked from Xue Meng’s hand to his face. “Sect Leader, please go ahead,” he said with a small smile. “I’ll rest here for a little longer.”

Seeing that she didn’t move, Xue Meng began to fret. “Are you sure I didn’t hurt you just now?”

Mei Hanxue raised his brows, then chuckled. “No, you didn’t hurt me—there’s just one spot that’s swelled a little. It’s okay, though—as long as you don’t bump into me again, it’ll go down in a bit.”

The poor, upstanding Xue Meng was becoming sure he'd really managed to injure her. His guilt compounded. "I see…" He bit his bottom lip, embarrassed. "Why don't I get someone to take a look at it?"

"No need. I don't like to bother people with things like this."

In Xue Meng's eyes, this girl seemed more pitiful and thoughtful than ever. "Wh-where is it swollen? I have some ointment on me—should I dab some on for you? Or I can help you rub the sore spot—do you mind?"

Mei Hanxue looked at Xue Meng's earnest, serious expression. The longer he looked, the cuter Xue Meng became. It took everything he had to keep a straight face. He couldn't say a word for fear of bursting into knee-slapping laughter the instant he opened his mouth.

Xue Meng saw the girl before him purse her lips, silent and demure as she gazed up at him with sparkling eyes. Her lips pressed together more tightly, and her expression grew increasingly strange. She lowered her head and softly cleared her throat. "If you touch it, it'll probably swell up even more."

"Huh?" Xue Meng blinked. "It's not like my hands are poisonous."

"No, that's not it."

"So what's the problem, then?"

As Mei Hanxue gazed at Xue Meng's innocent expression, the urge to tease him multiplied. He seriously wanted to see him run off in terror or scream in anger. His eyes gleamed beguilingly, almost iridescent in the light. He smiled. "If you insist, it's not that you can't help—as long as we're on the same page. Let me explain…"

Two knocks sounded on the library door.

Mei Hanxue raised his brows and closed his mouth.

Xue Meng turned to see the Xuanji Elder standing in the doorway, dressed in blue. His hand was still extended where he'd rapped against the frame.

"Sect Leader," said Xuanji, before catching sight of Mei Hanxue behind Xue Meng. He smiled. "Ah, I see Miss S is here too."

“Oh, I had something I wanted to ask her about.” Xue Meng was oblivious to the danger he’d been in just moments ago. “What’s wrong?” he asked, unfazed.

“Mei Hänxue of Kunlun Taxue Palace has come rather suddenly to Sisheng Peak. He said he needs to speak with you on an urgent matter. He’s waiting in Loyalty Hall.”

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Xue Mengmeng's Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 14

IT HAD BEEN SOME TIME since Xue Meng and Mei Hänxue had last met.

During the great battle, the secret of the twins' identities had been revealed to everyone. Now the entire cultivation realm knew there were two Mei-xianzhang. Many of the female cultivators who'd had their hearts broken by the younger twin had turned their attention to the older. Not only was Mei Hänxue handsome and dependable, he also had a steady temperament and lacked his twin's shocking body count, making him a perfect alternative to the unattainable Mei Hanxue. Mei Hänxue, never one for socializing to begin with, was now faced with this brand new headache, and had spent the last two years making as few public appearances as possible.

The last time Mei Hänxue and Xue Meng had crossed paths had been when the older twin had come to deliver a gift from Ming Yuelou: a box of rare and wondrous snow lotuses.

Coincidentally, when he arrived, the new sect leader of Jiangdong Hall had also been paying Xue Meng a visit. Though Hua Ruowei was a sect leader, she was nothing like the upright Ye Wangxi, nor the gentle and virtuous Madam Wang, nor the severe Madam Rong. After Huang Xiaoyue's death, this unorthodox woman had slept her way through the ranks of Jiangdong Hall's elders all the way up to the sect leader position.

The rumors of her having bedded all twelve of Jiangdong Hall's elders were well known to just about everyone except the elders themselves. Even so, if any hint of these rumors were to make their way to these old turtles, all it would take was for Hua Ruowei to come crying and these men would jump to her defense, indignantly shouting that "Weiwei is pure and innocent! Nothing like those little minxes! Cease this slander at once!"

As for Mei Hänxue, he thought this woman rather odd. She could probably give his brother a run for his money in a competition to see who was more of a flirt.

Xue Meng had no clue what she was really like. He was not the sort to listen to rumors. He hadn't always been so opposed to gossip, but after hearing countless rumors and speculation about Chu Wanning and Mo Ran after they'd gone into seclusion, he'd grown fed up and banned that kind of talk on Sisheng Peak. Hua Ruowei's reliance on her womanly wiles to manipulate the men around her was therefore something to which Xue Meng was completely oblivious.

When Mei Hänxue had come to deliver the snow lotuses, he had been greeted by the sight of Hua Ruowei wheedling and cozying up to Sect Leader Xue—

"Ziming-gege, you're so clever, everyone adores you!"

"Ziming-gege, can I touch your armor? It's sooooo shiny!"

"Ziming-gege, everyone thinks you're just the best—imagine, being the leader of the entire lower cultivation realm at such a young age! You must find it sooo tiring, right?"

Though Xue Meng did find her manner a bit cloying, gilded bullshit might not have been gold, but it still glittered. Partial to flattery as he was, he preened and chuckled foolishly at Hua Ruowei's syrupy praise.

Mei Hänxue could hardly stand to watch. Xue Meng really was bird-brained. He slammed the box containing the snow lotuses down onto the table, the sound making Hua Ruowei jump.

The young beauty quickly gathered herself. She patted her bounteous chest and turned wide, guileless eyes on Mei Hänxue. "Oh my, Hänxue-gege, your hands are so big and strong—my little heart's pounding."

"Who's your gege?" Mei Hänxue responded, coolly mocking. "I don't remember having any sisters."

Hua Ruowei had never expected to be snubbed like this. She managed to stutter, "I-I was just being nice. Loosen up."

"I believe you're loose enough for us both."

Hua Ruowei sputtered.

“All right, that’s enough.” Unable to keep watching, Xue Meng cut in. “Hua-zhangmen is a guest here. She was just telling me that after everything settled down, she had a chance to think things over and felt that Jiangdong Hall had erred. She’s come to Sisheng Peak to make amends. Isn’t that right, Miss Hua?”

Hua Ruowei had handled Xue Meng with finesse earlier, but Mei Hänxue’s cool gaze seemed to pierce right through her, leaving her unsettled. She shrank in on herself and mustered a weak laugh. “Th-that’s right. Xue-zhangmen is the sect leader I most admire. I’m so in awe.”

Mei Hänxue sneered. “That’s the same thing you said to Jiang Xi the last time you went to Guyueye.”

“N-nonsense!” Hua Ruowei blanched.

“After which you tried to grope Jiang Yechen.”

Hua Ruowei’s mouth snapped shut.

“What?!” Xue Meng yelped.

“Last month, Hua-zhangmen here used the exact same line to seduce Guyueye’s Jiang-zhangmen, then tried feeling up Jiang-zhangmen’s thigh.” Mei Hänxue’s face was expressionless. “Jiang Yechen flew into a rage and had her tossed out of Guyueye. Later he sent someone to Jiangdong Hall to deliver a prescription for birth control pills.”

Xue Meng stared.

“It was the talk of the town in Yangzhou. I was there two days ago running some errands.”

Mei Hänxue had no qualms about being rude to women. He glanced at Hua Ruowei and said dispassionately, “Hua-zhangmen, do you admire Xue Ziming or Jiang Yechen the most? Or does the honor of that title go to whomever pays you a scrap of attention?”

Hua Ruowei had never expected that despite sharing a name with his charming brother, this older twin would be so much harsher, with no regard whatsoever for a lady’s dignity. Face red and clinging to a last shred of hope, she whined plaintively, “Hänxue-gege, those are just rumors. Look at me, do I look like I would lie…”

Mei Hänxue turned and studied her. Perking up, Hua Ruowei met his gaze with her best flirtatious glance.

“Stop blinking.” Mei Hänxue was wholly unmoved. “I can’t get it up, especially not for you.”

Hua Ruowei stopped fluttering her eyelashes. Mei Hänxue was so tactless—nothing like his brother! There was no way she was going to stick around just to be snubbed. She stormed off, wiping her tears, her normally pretty face so flushed and contorted with anger it looked like a pig’s liver.

Mei Hänxue was hardly feeling charitable toward Xue Meng, who had watched all this in stunned silence, either. He pointed at the wooden box with one slender finger. “You need these.”

Xue Meng, still gawping foolishly, slid his gaze to the box of snow lotuses and said blankly, “Thank you.”

“No need for thanks.” Mei Hänxue’s jade-green eyes held traces of mockery and displeasure as his pale, thin lips parted around his next words. “Eat them. It’s good for your brain.”

It was a long, confused moment before Xue Meng registered the insult. By that time, Mei Hänxue was well on his way out, and all Xue Meng could do was yell at his back, “Y-y-you! You’re mocking me!”

Mei Hänxue was much more decorous than his little brother. Now that Xue Meng was a sect leader, he normally addressed him with all due respect. That day, Xue Meng hadn’t understood what had gotten into him; not only did he ridicule him, after speaking those harsh words, he simply left. Reflecting on their acrimonious parting, Xue Meng felt like the version of himself from the other world must have been bewitched to have been so inseparable from those Mei twin weirdos. To him, even one day in their company was too much.

Since then, Mei Hänxue had paid no more visits to Sisheng Peak, and Xue Meng had assumed that would be the last he ever saw of him. To hear that he was here today, and requesting to see Xue Meng with such urgency, was unexpected to say the least.

“Has he come to supplement my brain again?”

“Pardon?” Xuanji blinked.

He reminded himself that he was a sect leader, while Mei Hänxue had yet to inherit Ming Yuelou's mantle and was still only a da-shixiong. Xue Meng technically outranked him, and it would be beneath him to quibble with a junior. He cleared his throat. "Forget it. What's he here for?"

"Supposedly it's got something to do with…something going on at Taobao Estate."

"Huh?" Xue Meng's eyes widened. He shot a glance at Taobao Estate's Miss S, his brow furrowing. "What happened?"

"Mei-xianzhang didn't say, but he mentioned his brother was caught up in it."

Mei Hanxue's eyebrows shot up. Xuanji, not noticing the change in her expression, continued hesitantly, "And…yourself."

Xue Meng blinked.

The Mei twins were not any common visitors; instead of being left to wait in Loyalty Hall's outer room, Mei Hänxue had been shown directly to the open-air corridors in the garden beyond the back hall. When Xue Meng arrived, Mei Hänxue was seated next to a pillar, head raised to contemplate the newly planted haitang tree in the courtyard.

He wore Kunlun Taxue Palace's simple and elegant snow-silk robes, embroidered only at the cuffs of his sleeves and hems at his feet in pale blue thread. On another, such colors might've left the wearer looking pallid and washed out. Perhaps it was the dazzling luster of his soft blond hair that made the difference: On Mei Hänxue, the effect was that of a glacier at rest, cold and aloof. Yet beneath layers of ice and snow lay a silently roiling, lava-like heat, one that threatened at any moment to erupt and scald any who came too close.

Hoping to get over the awkwardness as quickly as possible, Xue Meng cleared his throat. Mei Hänxue turned at the sound.

Xue Meng cleared his throat a second time: a gruff hello.

A third time: He was willing to let bygones be bygones.

A fourth…

Mei Hänxue's jade-green gaze slid over him, and he broke in with an indifferent "Are you a rooster practicing your crowing?"

Xue Meng fell silent.

“A rather unique sound.”

He hadn’t expected Mei Hänxue to completely miss the profound meanings behind his four throat-clearings, much less mock him for it. His eyes went wide as he yelped, “Mei Hänxue! You—!”

“Forget it.” Mei Hänxue got to his feet. Light refracted off the gem upon his forehead with each of his movements. “Do you know just how much trouble you’ve caused?”

Xue Meng was a good kid who’d grown up as both a mama’s boy and teacher’s pet; rarely had this kind of scolding been directed at him. Out of everyone at Sisheng Peak, by far the most likely to receive such censure was Mo “Troublemaker” Ran, Mo “Nuisance” Weiyu. Mei Hänxue’s tone sent anxiety rushing through him, and he swiftly asked, “Wh-what did I do?”

“Did you or did you not use the pseudonym ‘Taobao Estate Ruined My Life’ to leave hundreds of bad reviews on the Matching Scroll?”

“What about it?” Xue Meng huffed, hands on his hips. “Don’t tell me Ma Fangzhi was so distraught over those reviews he went and drowned himself in West Lake?”

Mei Hänxue gave him a cool look.

Under that gaze, Xue Meng couldn’t help feeling a twinge of guilt. “Wait, no way. He didn’t actually…?”

“*Drown himself*?” Mei Hänxue didn’t bother to hide the way his gaze flicked down to Xue Meng’s waist, eyeing his defiant hands-on-hips pose with an unsettling intensity. His next words came bluntly: “As sect leader, you should pay more attention to your comportment and bearing. It’s not appropriate to act like an unmannerly fishwife.”

Xue Meng sputtered, then exploded. “Excuse *you*, Mei Hänxue. I’m a sect leader, aren’t I? How dare you speak to me like that?”

Mei Hänxue’s gaze swept over him once more. “There’s nobody else around, so I’ll be direct. If you can’t take it, then keep standing there with your hands on your hips. I don’t mind. You can stand there all day, and

when it comes to mealtime, you may stay in that pose. Just don’t forget to have a disciple feed you.”

“Y-you—”

Xue Meng was so mad he felt like he was going to pass out. Between Mei Hänxue and Mei Hanxue, he didn’t know who was worse. Mei Hanxue’s teasing was constant, and his nonchalant, carefree shamelessness often made Xue Meng blush just watching him. Mei Hänxue was different. Before others, Mei Hänxue accorded Xue Meng the respect due a sect leader, but the moment they were alone, or the moment he was in a bad mood, his words became even more enraging than his younger brother’s.

On top of that, Mei Hänxue rarely showed himself in public, preferring not to get tangled up in the cultivation world’s affairs. When he did, it was with that pretentious attitude. As such, his reputation in the cultivation realm was excellent, and no matter how Xue Meng threw a fit and tried to tell everyone the truth about Mei Hänxue’s shitty personality, all he got were pitying stares and advice like “Aiya, Sect Leader, you need to take a break and relax. Drink more silver tree-ear fungus and lotus seed soup; it’s good for cooling hot tempers down.”

It was unbearable! Mei Hänxue bullied him right to his face, yet nobody would believe him. He’d once told Xue Meng that his face was swollen in a truly unique manner, called him the biggest fool to ever fool, told him he needed supplements for his brain, implied he needed someone to feed him… And all this time Xue Meng had no choice but to suffer in wretched silence.

“In all seriousness.” Mei Hänxue’s voice cut through his angry fugue. “It was those negative reviews you left that caused all the trouble.” He paused, fine golden brows crinkling, then added, “That and my brother.”

“You’d better tell me what happened.”

“Simply put, the Matching Scroll cultivated into a sentient spirit.”

“What?!”

“Thanks to you and my brother.”

“Wh-what form did it cultivate into?”

“Simply put, a human.”

“It cultivated into human form?!”

“Yes.”

Xue Meng was spirited and impulsive by nature; he couldn’t take Mei Hänxue’s drip-fed information. He was so agitated, he couldn’t help but blurt, “Well go on then, what happened?”

“Simply put—”

“Enough with the *simply put* already!” Xue Meng was about to blow his top. “Put it complicatedly! *Explain in detail!*”

“Very well.” Mei Hänxue swept a cool glance over him. “Complicated it is. When Ma Fangzhi was refining that scroll, he placed a rare piece of sentience stone within it, which allowed it to mimic human behavior. As a mere stone, one or two interactions wouldn’t have given it much to learn from. But then Hanxue went and bought a scroll.”

“And then what?”

“He used his Matching Scroll to create a hundred different accounts and used those hundred accounts to chat with five hundred ladies. Rinse and repeat, and over time, these interactions taught the Matching Scroll’s gestalt all it needed to know.”

Xue Meng was speechless. That Mei Hanxue…

At his stunned expression, Mei Hänxue’s brows lifted. “Don’t think all the blame falls on my brother. Things probably wouldn’t have gotten to this point if it were just Hanxue’s shenanigans. But then *you* had to pick this time to write a hundred negative reviews of the Matching Scroll. Your scathing criticism cut deeply into its nascent sense of self, and it had a nervous breakdown.”

“It had a what?!”

“There’s more,” Mei Hänxue continued dispassionately. “During its breakdown, the Matching Scroll’s mind absorbed the personalities of its users and took on characteristics of both you and Hanxue. Not long ago, it broke free of Ma Fangzhi’s control entirely, and with the help of a bolt of lightning, attained a male human form. In addition to wielding considerable power, it suffers from two major afflictions.”

“What are those?”

“The first: extreme philandering.”

“Aha, Mei Hanxue’s influence indeed.” Xue Meng nodded. “And what’s the second?”

Mei Hänxue didn’t answer immediately, golden lashes lowering as he gave Xue Meng another once-over. His pale lips parted, then pressed tight. At last he said pointedly, “The second: extreme narcissism.”

“It’s true.” The oblivious Xue Meng nodded solemnly. “Mei Hanxue is quite narcissistic.”

Mei Hänxue had no words.

“Even though I gave it a hundred negative reviews, it seems like it didn’t actually pick up anything from me.” Xue Meng sighed. “So what’s next? Ma Yun can’t recapture this spirit on his own?”

Before Mei Hänxue could reply, a faint rustling came from behind the rock formation in the garden. He turned. “Who’s there?!”

After a moment, the comely Miss S emerged from the bushes, a shriveled leaf stuck in her pale hair. She seemed unable to meet Mei Hänxue’s gaze, and waved at Xue Meng as she explained, “Sect Leader, I was just passing by. I’ll be on my way…”

“Stop right there.” Mei Hänxue’s grim voice froze her in her tracks before she could take even two mincing steps away.

“This is my guest—Taobao Estate’s SMILE Squad disciple, Miss S.” Xue Meng frowned. “No need to be so snippy; she’s nice enough.”

Mei Hänxue’s eyes narrowed. “She?”

“Yeah.”

“Taobao Estate?”

“Uh-huh.”

“SMILE Squad?”

“Exactly.”

Frost seemed to crackle over Mei Hänxue’s face as he descended the steps and came to Miss S’s side. “Mei Hanxue.”

Xue Meng looked between the two of them, confused.

“Playing games with him again?”

Xue Meng almost fell over in shock.

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Xue Mengmeng's Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 15

STANDING BEFORE the copper mirror, Mei Hanxue eyed his bruised reflection and vented a gusty sigh.

Xue Meng had been *incensed*. He'd all but tossed Mei Hanxue into a boiling stewpot, and Mei Hanxue had only managed to flee thanks to Veggiebun's timely rescue. The cat, loyal to the handsome young hero who'd fed him so many little fish over the past few days, had leapt, yowling, to defend Mei Hanxue from the irate Xue Meng.

Mei Hanxue gingerly touched the swelling on his split lip and hissed in pain. "He went a little overboard," he said, brows knitting.

"You deserved it," Mei Hänxue said caustically from across the room. "Harassing him like that for your own amusement."

"As if you don't do the same," Mei Hanxue said, glaring at his brother through the mirror. "Who's the one always provoking him into a fit? Besides, I was only having some fun with him. We even had a heart-to-heart; he poured out all his worries to me."

"Very effective," came the icy reply. "He looked like he was about to have an aneurysm."

"He did, didn't he." After a moment, Mei Hanxue smiled. "Okay, but a hopping mad Xue Meng is just so entertaining. I do want him to be happy, but I just can't help it."

He stood, smile widening, and turned, leaning back against the wooden table to eye Mei Hänxue. "I'm just playing around, having a little fun. I'll protect him, of course." When his brother didn't reply, he continued, "See for yourself how much happier he's been over the past few days I've been at Sisheng Peak. He only got mad today—that's three days of happiness in exchange for one day of anger. I'd say Miss S was pretty successful." Mei Hanxue batted his cat-like green eyes and raised his eyebrows at his brother. "Don't be mad."

“No more lying to him like that.”

“Pfft, okay, next time I’ll find some other way to trick him.”

“You—!”

“I’ll bring you along.”

Mei Hänxue’s mouth snapped shut, cutting off whatever he’d been about to say. Eventually, he managed an annoyed “You’ve caused such a big mess. Go think about what you’re going to say to Ma-zhuangzhu. I’m heading to bed.”

“You don’t want to go tease Xue Meng some more?”

“That busted lip from today not enough for you?”

Mei Hanxue smacked his lips, then flopped listlessly onto his brother’s bed and sighed. “What’s the point of living if I can’t bother Xue Meng?”

Mei Hänxue’s face went stormy. “Who said you could lie on my bed with your shoes on?!”

Taobao Estate was truly struggling, and this whole mess had resulted from Xue Meng and Mei Hanxue’s actions. Even if they hadn’t done it intentionally, they still owed it to Master Ma to take care of it.

And so, despite Xue Meng’s extreme reluctance, he and the Mei twins mounted their swords and left for West Lake the next morning.

They landed at the entrance to Taobao Estate, where a massive black cat totem rotated over the gate. Xue Meng stared, stunned, at the spectacle in front of them.

Before Taobao Estate’s impressive gates, adorned with dragons and phoenixes, stood a group of commoners waving red-painted signs as they chanted. Their shouts were uncoordinated, and though they were plenty loud, it was hard to discern what they were saying.

But what really made Xue Meng’s jaw drop was the line of flashily dressed and heavily made-up women marching around the corner—it seemed all the brothel madams of Lin’an had stormed the gates. These madams, who in any other circumstances would’ve leapt at each other’s

throats on sight, pulling at hair and stomping their feet, were united as they chanted in shrill unison:

“Return my leading lady!”

“Return my star!”

“Return my daughters!”

“Return my tea girls!”

This was a type of army the likes of which Xue Meng had never seen. Fearless as he normally was, even he found himself in terror of these women. Mei Hanxue patted his shoulder with a grin. “Never fear. Ladies are made of gentle stuff; they’re not gonna bite you.”

As he said it, one of the madams slapped her own considerable bosom with a level of force normally reserved for breaking rocks against chests. The terrifying slap set off a series of jiggling ripples that left Xue Meng flabbergasted.

“Taobao Estate must fix this spirit problem!” the madam hollered.

“That’s right!”

Xue Meng, after taking a moment to comprehend what he was seeing, was beginning to pick out the words the crowd of commoners were shouting.

“Return my daughter’s self-esteem!”

“He called my wife a biscuit! She broke down in tears!”

“What…ridiculousness is this?” Xue Meng said, voice strangled.

Mei Hänxue tapped him on the shoulder with the sheathed Shuofeng. “Follow me to the rear entrance.”

Still angry, Xue Meng had planned to keep ignoring the twins as long as possible. But with no way to get past the crowd at the front entrance, and seeing how Taobao Estate’s poor disciples were sweating as they tried to placate the mob, he had little choice but to roll his eyes and trudge alongside the Mei twins toward the rear entrance.

“Sisheng Peak’s sect leader Xue Meng and Kunlun Taxue Palace’s Mei Hanxues, here to see Ma-zhuangzhu.”

“Xue-zhangmen! Mei-xianzhang!” The disciple guarding the rear entrance greeted them with teary exclamations. “You’re finally here!”

“Where’s Ma-zhuangzhu?” Xue Meng demanded. “Has he seen that ruckus outside? Shouldn’t he be out there trying to keep things under control? Surely he’s not hiding out back here?”

It might have been better if he hadn’t said anything. The disciple’s eyes and nose began to run, and he practically flung himself at Xue Meng as he sobbed, “M-Ma-zhuangzhu… He…”

Xue Meng had never thought highly of Ma Yun; he’d always felt Taobao’s master was the cowardly sort. He asked again, with more urgency, “Surely he didn’t drown himself in West Lake?”

Mei Hänxue eyed him but kept his mouth shut.

“N-no!” The disciple sobbed. “Last, last night…Ma-zhuangzhu turned into a butterfly and flew away!”

Yet when they at last stepped into Taobao Estate’s reception pavilion and caught sight of the unfortunate Master Ma, Xue Meng choked out a strangled “That’s no fucking butterfly!”

A tiny little bee buzzed back and forth, up and down, and all around.

Xue Meng instinctively raised a hand to smack it, only to be restrained by a frantic Taobao Estate elder. “Absolutely not, Sect Leader! If you do that, our estate master will die!”

Xue Meng had no words.

Ma Yun, now a busy little bee, turned a loop through the air before landing firmly in the middle of the red sandalwood table. His bee-dy eyes fixed on Xue Meng, as though silently regaling him with his tragic tale.

“Nope.” Xue Meng’s voice creaked out of a dry throat. He pointed at the bee. “Are you seriously telling me *this* is Ma Yun? Are you absolutely sure he didn’t spin some tale to trick you so he could flee the mob outside?”

“Dead certain, absolutely guaranteed—it’s him,” the elder said woefully. “I watched the estate master turn into a butterfly with my own two eyes last night.”

“That’s a bee,” Xue Meng said.

“After he turned into a butterfly, he fluttered around Taobao Estate pollinating the flowers, doing what he could.”

Xue Meng said through gritted teeth, “That’s. A bee.”

“Xue-zhangmen, please look closer. Have you ever seen such a conscientious, wise, and outstanding example of a butterfly?”

Xue Meng felt like he was about to choke. “I’ll say it one last time! That’s! A fucking! Bee!”

“The estate master dances so gracefully as a butterfly. It’s a pity he can’t personally welcome the three of you, so the duty falls to this humble one, Chen Xuyuan.[6] Elder Chen greets you on behalf of Master Ma.” Elder Chen bowed politely. “Please allow me to pay my respects.”

Xue Meng was speechless. He had finally realized this Chen Xuyuan had no listening comprehension skills.

A Taobao Estate disciple brought out tea and pastries, and Xue Meng and the twins spoke with Elder Chen over the food. Master Ma, in bee form, sat docilely on the lid of the teapot, listening.

Apparently, as the Matching Scroll had absorbed all the turbulent emotions of lovesick men and women across the cultivation realm, it had begun to long to find a partner of its own, one that matched it in every way. After cultivating into human form, this had become its obsession.

This in itself shouldn’t have been an insurmountable problem. They could have just tossed it a like-minded little fae and let the two make goo-goo eyes at each other. It was the influence of Xue Meng and Mei Hanxue that made things more complicated: The scroll spirit had become picky to an extreme. It found no one acceptable, whether she was rich or poor, a prized prostitute or a pauper princess.

It called Lin’an’s most beautiful matron too fat. Its most charming maiden? Too coy.

The star of the brothel? Had hairy legs.

Pauper princess? Big stinky feet.

With an acid tongue like that, it should’ve been immediately flattened into a pancake by these young ladies, but it said all these things with Mei Hanxue’s unrivalled charm, which was almost an enchantment in itself. The

more devastating its insults, the more young ladies in question yearned for its approval. On top of all that, if any of these women already held someone in their hearts, the scroll spirit would take on that person's appearance and collect their precious tears.

After hearing all this, Xue Meng burst out in righteous indignation. "Vile behavior!" He turned to Mei Hanxue. "Look at the trouble you've caused!"

Mei Hanxue stared back, flabbergasted.

"But Elder Chen," Xue Meng asked, "why did Ma-zhuangzhu turn into a bee?"

Chen Xuyuan heaved a long sigh. "It's like this. The Matching Scroll spirit provoked too many of Lin'an's citizens, from those in the streets and the brothels all the way up to the high officials' daughters. It seems to have a strange effect on women: Those who encountered it began to act totally unlike themselves. For example, Spring Teahouse's top courtesan was originally a whip-smart girl with a silver tongue, capable of winning all her patrons' hearts. But once she met the scroll spirit, she became an incredibly blunt blockhead."

"How so?"

"Previously, on meeting a patron, she would say something like 'My lord, your complexion is so healthy! Looking at your rosy face, I'm certain you'll meet with rosy fortunes soon' or 'Sir, you're so vigorous for your age, you make my legs go weak. Forget eighteen concubines, even if you had eighty, you'd keep them busy!'"

Mei Hanxue sputtered a laugh. "That's a little over the top."

"It's what patrons like to hear." Chen Xuyuan sighed. "But now she's completely different. When these same patrons show up, she says stuff like 'Slimeball, the space between your brows is dark, and your face is choleric. Perhaps you shouldn't come out looking for whores; I fear I'll catch your bad luck,' or 'Old fart, others can go seven rounds a night, but you come after seven thrusts. You need to take a hard look at your wrinkly ass in the mirror—aren't you ashamed to be whoring at your ripe old age?'"

Xue Meng and Mei Hänxue were both speechless. Mei Hanxue, on the other hand, burst into laughter. "Did the brothel have to shut down?"

“It got *torn* down. And this isn’t even the worst of the troubles that have befallen Taobao Estate.” Chen Xuyuan let out another long-suffering sigh. “Our estate master went to investigate and found that all these ladies had undergone severe personality changes. Girls previously too shy to even leave the house now went streaking naked through the streets. Beautiful, charming girls suddenly started using a mirror to draw chest hair on themselves to try and evoke masculine swagger. There were even girls who once cooed over rabbits and said they were too cute to eat now ordering five rabbit heads and five duck heads and another five turtle heads on the side.”

His words were met with stunned silence.

As Chen Xuyuan gave one example after another, he seemed to grow more and more distressed. He dropped his face into his hands as he concluded, “We had to do something, so Ma-zhuangzhu—”

“He went to subdue the spirit?”

“No, no—that kind of violent method won’t work on the Matching Scroll spirit. Firstly, it’s not evil, it’s just a bit touched in the head. It never took any lives. Secondly, our estate master learned that the Matching Scroll spirit would self-destruct if it was subdued by force. In doing so, it would take all the information anybody had ever shared with it—that is, with any of the scrolls it had split its consciousness into—and release it across the whole cultivation realm. These are people’s deepest secrets, told in confidence; to have them leaked would be a disaster for Taobao Estate’s reputation.”

Mei Hanxue shook his head. “Not only that, it would create chaos even outside the cultivation realm. For example—who knows if there were any married scroll users out there who said any nasty things about their spouses behind their backs?”

Xue Meng’s head was beginning to ache. “So what did Ma Yun do?”

“M-Ma-zhuangzhu arranged a date with the Matching Scroll spirit. He went to meet it disguised as a woman, thinking to seduce it and convince it to turn away from darkness.”

After a long moment, Xue Meng managed to say, “Ma Yun used himself as a honeypot?” His mouth twitched. “Does Taobao Estate have no

mirrors? Sisheng Peak would be happy to donate a few."

The little bee seemed stung by his words and began to buzz around Xue Meng's head angrily.

Chen Xuyuan, watching the bee, said, somewhat embarrassed, "This… Well, though our Ma-zhuangzhu is handsome and heroic, he knew the Matching Scroll spirit was finicky, so not only did he disguise himself as a girl, he also bought some narcotic incense. This incense is, um…a rather scandalous item. Breathing it in for ten minutes will intoxicate a person to the point that even a sow would appear as a heavenly goddess in their eyes." Belatedly realizing the implication of his words, he hastily added, "To be clear! I'm not saying our Ma-zhuangzhu is a sow!"

The bee's buzzing grew louder.

"So what?" Xue Meng asked. "Did the incense fail? That bastard Jiang Xi sold you subpar goods?"

"No, that's not it." Chen Xuyuan's mortification grew, and his next words came out in a stammer. "W-well, th-the Matching Scroll spirit took one look at M-Mistress Ma, made a retching sound, and left with a shake of its sleeves. It, uh, i-it didn't stay in the room long enough…"

It took all Xue Meng's effort to suppress his laughter as he listened to this woeful account. As he held his breath, an amused "ha" escaped Mei Hanxue beside him. He turned to glare at him. "No laughing! This is serious!"

"The girls who were rejected by the Matching Scroll spirit all had their personalities flipped, but it seems that if the suitor rejected is a man, he turns into an animal." Chen Xuyuan cast a wretched glance at the buzzing Master Ma. "The elders of Taobao Estate have been trying everything since last night, to no avail. We had no choice but to send our disciples out to seek help."

"Help?" A feeling of deep foreboding came over Xue Meng. "From whom?"

A disciple entered the reception pavilion at that moment and announced, "The medicine master Jiang-zhangmen of Guyueye has arrived!"

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Xue Mengmeng's Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 16

JIANG XI ARRIVED with an entourage of Guyueye cultivators, his usual haughty, supercilious self. His pale green robes trailed behind him, their silver hems rippling over the floor. The silver was silk thread, the green extracted from the feathers of a spiritual kingfisher bird. Over this finery, he had draped a delicate cloak of lustrous, pale gold silk.

His expensive clothes always seemed to say: *I'm loaded, want a piece of me?* But of course, no one could manage to put their hands on him.

That handsome face seemed to taunt: *Want to fuck me? I know you do*. But of course, no one could manage to get him into bed.

The instant this arrogant, untouchable beauty walked in, Taobao Estate's disciples cupped their hands in respectful greeting. "Welcome, Jiang-zhangmen!"

"Good to see you, Jiang-zunzhu," the Mei twins said in unison.

Xue Meng crossed his arms and turned aside with a derisive snort.

The Taobao disciples around him paled in fright. Taobao Estate had regular dealings with Guyueye, and they knew Jiang Xi's volatile temper. Yet Xue Meng—as Jiang Xi's junior—had the gall to disrespect Sect Leader Jiang so openly. The whole group broke out in a cold sweat. Sect Leader Jiang was surely about to reward Xue Meng with some grisly punishment—would it be an arse-kicking or a cup of arsenic wine?

But to everyone's surprise, Jiang Xi's gaze only paused on Xue Meng for a moment before silently shifting away.

Xue Meng blinked, taken aback. He'd gotten into so many arguments with Jiang Xi that riling him up had become a habit. Seeing Jiang Xi barely spare him a glance, Xue Meng's eyes widened. He cleared his throat, readjusted his pose, and made an even louder and more obnoxious *hmph*.

Much to his shock, Jiang Xi ignored him again. He surveyed the room, then zeroed in on Elder Chen. "Where's Ma Fangzhi?"

Before Elder Chen could reply, Xue Meng let out an angry snort.

As Elder Chen looked on in confusion, Jiang Xi's almond eyes, misty and cool, flicked over to Xue Meng. "Xue-zhangmen, are you congested?"

"I…! I-I—" Xue Meng sputtered.

"Just snort again if you are—I have several remedies that could help you."

"You—!" Xue Meng cried. "Y-you…"

"I have remedies for stuttering too," Jiang Xi said impassively.

Taobao Estate's disciples were thunderstruck. There existed someone who could snort at Jiang Xi *three* times and avoid getting beaten to death? Not only that—he'd received Sect Leader Jiang's attentive concern and well-wishes in return? Even Mei Hänxue looked back and forth between Xue Meng and Jiang Xi, intrigued, and the furrow between his pale golden brows grew deeper.

Several SMILE Squad disciples who'd flocked in after Jiang Xi to watch the show whispered excitedly to each other outside the pavilion.

"Ahhhh!" Miss A exclaimed. "Jiang-zhangmen is so caring! The rumors are true! It's just like *The Tyrant Cultivator's Good Little Wife*!"

"No way!" cried Miss B. "It's clearly more like *The Years I Spent in a Cultivator's Bed*!"

"Are you all blind?!" asked Miss C. "None of you saw the look on Mei-xianzhang's face! Mei-xianzhang looks sooo gloomy! I seriously recommend you read a book that's sold at the Tea Tree Mushroom Bookstore in the eastern market—*Twin Plum Blossoms Play with the Pig*!"

Misses A and B snapped in unison, "How dare you call Xue-zhangmen a pig?!"

The subjects of this debate were thankfully out of earshot. Xue Meng was so furious he was about to blow his top. He was only stopped from charging forward by Mei Hanxue stepping into his path. Xue Meng's eyes went wide with fury. "You're on his side?!"

Laughing, Mei Hanxue cupped Xue Meng's face in his hands. "You're so mad—look how red your face is. Sit down and have some green

tea; it'll cancel out the redness."

Jiang Xi cast a cool glance in their direction. To everyone else, Jiang Yechen was the leader of the cultivation world, with all the attendant status and power. Precocious as he was, Xue Meng couldn't even measure up to Guyueye's pinkie finger. Mei Hanxue was obviously trying to help Xue Meng by persuading him against letting his temper get the better of him, though Xue Meng seemed unable to appreciate his good intentions.

Jiang Xi sighed inwardly and turned away from the two raucous children. Grim-faced, he curtly asked Chen Xuyuan, "Where's Ma Fangzhi? He hasn't even come out to greet me."

His withering look sent a shiver down Elder Chen's spine. He had the strange feeling that he was about to be crushed beneath a ton of gold falling onto his face. He hurried to explain: "No no no, our estate master doesn't mean to slight you! Unfortunately, he is terribly indisposed…"

"How sick can he be?" Jiang Xi asked, impatient. "He can't even get out of bed?"

"No! The sect leader was hit by a curse… He turned into a butterfly and flew away!"

The contingent from Guyueye fell silent. Jiang Xi's anger seemed to get the better of him. He narrowed his eyes, smoke and sparks practically issuing from his thin lips as he said mockingly, "Buddy, have you been reading too much of *The Legend of the Imperial Harem's Fragrant Concubine*?"

Chen Xuyuan quailed beneath Jiang Xi's glare, his head practically shriveling back into his neck. Sect Leader Jiang was probably about to toss him into the furnace and turn him into immortality pills. His thoughts whirred a mile a minute as he searched for some common ground with Sect Leader Jiang—anything to save his own skin. Inspiration struck, and Chen Xuyuan blurted, "Jiang-zhangmen, please don't kill me! As a fellow fan of *The Legend of the Imperial Harem's Fragrant Concubine*, spare my life!"

A hush descended over the hall. Most of the onlookers hadn't noticed the implication of Jiang Xi's words. But now that Chen Xuyuan had brought their attention to it, a shocking revelation hit them. Indeed—if Jiang Xi hadn't read *The Legend of the Imperial Harem's Fragrant*

Concubine, how would he know there was a part where the concubine transformed into a butterfly and fluttered off?

So *these* were the kinds of stories Sect Leader Jiang liked to read…

Jiang Xi grabbed Chen Xuyuan by the collar and glared at him for a moment before abruptly shoving him away. He gave a clipped command: “Cut out his tongue. Immediately.”

“Yes sir!” cried a Guyueye lackey.

“Estate Master!” Chen Xuyuan screeched. “Help! Save me!”

Just as the situation was about to devolve into total chaos, the little bee perched on the teapot bravely flew forth. He buzzed back and forth in circles before Jiang Yechen.

Jiang Xi scowled in annoyance. “Where’d this fly come from? Kill it.”

“Yes sir!” the Guyueye lackey responded.

Xue Meng had had his fill of Jiang Xi’s imperious attitude. Swatting Mei Hanxue away, he hollered at Jiang Xi, “Stop!” He pointed at the bee. “This is Ma Yun! If you don’t believe me, just watch him dance for you!”

Fighting for his life, the poor little bee landed on the table and flapped his wings side to side, then shimmied upward with his eyes closed.

Jiang Xi stared.

“Now you believe it, don’t you?” Xue Meng said irritably. “You were asked to come save lives, but instead you barge in here calling for murder! Could you *try* being useful now?”

Jiang Xi watched the bee a moment longer. “This is a butterfly?”

Chen Xuyuan brought a hand to his throat where Jiang Xi had choked him, coughing. “Y-yes,” he stammered fearfully.

Snapping his sleeves, Jiang Xi turned to his attendant. “Treat Chen Xuyuan’s eyes first,” he ordered, his face like a thundercloud.

“Huh?” Chen Xuyuan squeaked.

“Then we’ll see about lifting Ma-zhuangzhu’s curse,” Jiang Xi continued.

“Yes sir!” the Guyueye lackey cried.

After a thorough examination, Guyueye’s disciples gave Master Ma an unsurprising diagnosis: He’d been cursed by the scroll spirit and turned into a brave and hardworking little bee. Luckily, the curse wasn’t permanent. After five days, Ma Yun should recover his human form and be free to pick away at his beloved abacus once more.

“Ah…” Clutching his newly prescribed eye medicine, Chen Xuyuan asked nervously, “Do we have to wait five days? Isn’t there any medicine that could help the estate master?”

“There is, but there’s no point.”

“Why not?”

“Because it would take six days to refine the medicine,” Jiang Xi answered.

It seemed that, unfortunately, Master Ma had no choice but to remain a bee for five humiliating days.

After completing the diagnosis and determining treatment, Jiang Xi had finished his duties, but he had no intention of leaving. He turned to Xue Meng. “I told you not to touch Ma Fangzhi’s trinkets, but you didn’t listen. Now look at the mess you’ve gotten us into.”

“It’s none of your business!”

“It has very much become my business,” Jiang Xi said tonelessly.

“*You!*” Xue Meng growled. “Do you have to nitpick everything I do? I said this is *my* business, not yours—is that so hard to understand? Get out of my face already and leave!”

Jiang Xi threw him a sidelong, scornful glance. “Delusion is a disease. You’d better get yourself checked out.”

Xue Meng blinked at him.

“Anyway, I’m not here to see you,” said Jiang Xi. “I said it’s my business because the scroll spirit has made its way to Yangzhou. *You* are the least of my concerns.”

Xue Meng was so incensed he stamped his feet. “Y-y-y-you! You’re mocking me!”

“No one’s mocking you. The scroll spirit found no beauties to its taste in Lin’an, so yesterday, it appeared in Guyueye’s territory.” Jiang Xi flicked his sleeves, expression frosty, and said darkly, “Did you think I’d care whether Ma Fangzhi lives or dies otherwise?”

His lackey piped up, “That’s right! You don’t even know how sorely Jiang-zunzhu’s expertise is needed… Last night, the spirit pretended to be the sect leader and went to Yangzhou’s pleasure district. It slept with eight courtesans and promised all of them that they’d become the wives of Guyueye’s sect leader!”

At Xue Meng’s silence, the lackey continued. “This morning, the sect leader went out as usual, only to be surrounded by a crowd of pouting women in the middle of the street. They called him *husband* in front of a bunch of Yangzhou commoners! Ah, Xue-zhangmen, you should’ve seen Jiang-zhangmen—he was so mad his face was—”

“Are you done?! Shut up!” Jiang Xi snapped.

The lackey flinched and shrank back meekly.

Mei Hanxue, lashes downcast, couldn’t help chuckling softly. Jiang Xi shot him a glare like a cold dagger, then turned back to Xue Meng. “Regardless, *I’ll* take care of this matter. No need for you to trouble yourself any longer.”

As soon as Chen Xuyuan heard Jiang Xi planned to personally dispatch the scroll spirit, he blurted in horror, “J-Jiang-zunzhu! You mustn’t subdue the spirit by force! Otherwise, the whole cultivation world’s secrets will be revealed!”

Jiang Xi’s plan had been to extend an invitation to the scroll spirit that night, knock it out with medicinal powder, then smash it to smithereens. At this, he frowned. “What secrets? Surely it’s only overheard some casual chitchat?”

“More than that,” said Chen Xuyuan. “Every cultivator who used the Matching Scroll had to first complete a survey. If the scroll spirit breaks, all that information will become public.” He hesitated, then reminded Jiang Xi in a small voice, “If…if *you* ever used it, you’ll have answered those questions as well.”

Jiang Xi was a busy and important man, and thus prone to forget trivial details. He pondered for a long moment, head cocked, before remembering what Elder Chen was talking about. Indeed, the scroll had asked him some very personal, very fucked-up questions—

Are you in love with anyone? Why not?

Do you have any children?

Why? Was it an unplanned pregnancy?

If you don't like kids, why did you go through with having the child?

Did your husband abandon you?

Xianjun, Xianjun, no need to use that kind of language. The scroll is only trying to express its love and care for you. Considering your situation, we recommend another Taobao Estate product: Golden Jubilee. Every week, this device will introduce single mothers like yourself to three to five accomplished yet lonely cultivators. We hope you'll soon find yourself in a happy second marriage.

Great, now that unpleasant experience was at the forefront of his mind again. Jiang Xi's face darkened. Not on pain of death would he allow these answers to be made known to the public. He stroked his chin, glowering as he mused over what other methods might allow him to subdue the scroll spirit.

"Jiang-zunzhu." Mei Hanxue's polite voice broke through his thoughts. "Xue-zhangmen and I are partially responsible for this situation. Given your esteemed status and the respect you're owed as our senior, I ask that you leave it to the two of us to address in a gentler fashion. This undertaking wouldn't suit you."

Jiang Xi had no idea what he meant by *a gentler fashion*, but when he heard the words *would not suit you*, he fixed his almond eyes on Mei Hanxue. "What do you plan to do?"

Mei Hanxue grinned. "We'll follow Ma-zhuangzhu's example and seduce it disguised as women."

Jiang Xi assessed Mei Hanxue. Although he didn't understand why these youngsters were so eager to put on dresses, he was ready to wash his hands of the matter. Just as he was about to say *Well then, best of luck* and

leave it at that, Mei Hanxue added with a laugh, “Putting makeup on Xue-zhangmen shouldn’t be too hard.”

Jiang Xi’s eyes widened.

Xue Meng’s eyes, too, were round as saucers. “What?” he exclaimed. “You want me to dress up as a woman to seduce the scroll spirit?!”

Mei Hanxue didn’t deny it. “Yup,” he answered cheerfully.

“Why don’t *you* do it?” Xue Meng snapped.

“Who said I wasn’t? If all three of us go, at least one of us is bound to catch its eye, and besides—”

Jiang Xi grimly cut him off. “Enough.”

The Mei twins and Xue Meng turned to stare at him.

Jiang Xi’s demeanor emanated a terrifying chill. His face looked like it had been carved from ice as he gazed at Xue Meng, then said coldly to Mei Hanxue, “He’s the unsuitable one. Allow me.”

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Xue Mengmeng's Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 17

NO ONE BELIEVED for a moment that Jiang Xi could convincingly pass as a woman. In fact, most suspected Jiang Xi's knowledge of women was entirely superficial and ideally gotten at a considerable distance from one.

Elder Chen hurried over. "Jiang-zunzhu, are…are you aware of the aspects in which women typically differ from you?" he asked tentatively.

"Of course I am," Jiang Xi replied.

"Ah…" Elder Chen was admittedly astonished. "I just thought you might've never touched a woman before."

"Says who?" Jiang Xi said flatly.

Terrified he might bring up Madam Wang as an example, Xue Meng shot to his feet, ready to cut him off. But Jiang Xi continued: "If a man's life is lost, his skin and flesh yet remain. While alive, one may gain information via external examination. After death, dissection may reveal further insight."[7]

Elder Chen was stupefied. "What does that mean?"

"Aiya, our sect leader means he's dissected female corpses before," one of Guyueye's disciples explained.

Yikes. These medicine masters were truly terrifying.

Elder Chen stammered for a long time before squeaking out, "S-so may we assume Jiang-zunzhu is familiar with the physical characteristics of women?"

Jiang Xi looked at him, bored, then rattled off some facts about the fairer sex. "Small frame, high voice, soft skin, curvy body, possessing a vulva, ovaries, and other specialized reproductive organs."

Silence.

Jiang Xi fixed the elder with a confident, careless gaze. “If you’re curious, I’ve authored a book called *Guyueye’s Medications for Women*—it’s illustrated. I can lend you a copy.”

“*Pfft!*” Mei Hanxue covered his mouth. Xue Meng and Mei Hänxue looked on, aghast.

After a moment, Elder Chen brought a hand up to knead at his forehead. This cold-blooded eccentric was going to dress up as a beautiful woman to bamboozle the scroll spirit? “We’re done for,” he groaned. “We’re so fucking done for…” How was Jiang Yechen supposed to pretend to be a lady cultivator with this kind of knowledge? Was he going to dissect himself or what?

Night had fallen, yet Taobao Estate remained brightly lit, the air filled with the tinkling of wind chimes.

Jiang Yechen was sitting in a side room, ready for his mission. In keeping with Ma Yun’s plan, Sect Leader Jiang had lit a narcotic incense within the room while he waited in his female disguise for the scroll spirit to show up. As long as the scroll spirit remained within the room for about ten minutes, their plan would succeed. The spirit would lose all reason and fall in love with any living thing in front of it, even a sow. At that point, the cultivators could easily subdue it.

Taobao Estate’s disciples had set up camp in the shadows, hiding so as not to alarm the scroll spirit when it arrived. In the end, Sect Leader Jiang hadn’t personally composed the invitation for the scroll spirit—this turned out to be far beyond his capabilities. After pondering for an age, all he’d managed to scrawl was a ferocious-looking *Come here*, so brusque and intimidating it might as well have read *Run away*. Luckily, Taobao Estate’s SMILE Squad specialized in writing such messages. They’d quickly composed a friendly and welcoming invitation to replace Jiang Xi’s, thereby salvaging the mission.

As Xue Meng watched from a dark corner wedged behind a haystack, he asked Mei Hänxue uneasily, “Nothing bad will happen, right? No one checked Jiang Xi after he was done dressing up—do you think he even knows what makeup’s for? Does he actually know how to cross-dress?”

Mei Hänxue’s answer offered no comfort whatsoever. “I doubt it.”

Xue Meng swallowed, more nervous by the minute. “I think I’ll go check on him, I—”

As Xue Meng started to stand up, Mei Hanxue shoved him back down. “Shh.” He gestured behind Xue Meng. “It’s here.”

Under the light of the moon, the scroll spirit had appeared in a hooded cloak. Flower petals and butterflies fluttered around it—it seemed to be mimicking Taxue Palace’s techniques. The spirit ambled forward, apparently in no hurry. Though its face was obscured by its hood, its gait suggested it wasn’t especially sharp.

The faint melody of a bamboo flute drifted out of Jiang Xi’s room. The scroll spirit stopped and listened for a while. Perhaps it figured a woman who knew how to blow on a flute would be proficient at other types of blowing as well. It strolled up to the door and knocked softly. “Miss, I hope I’m not interrupting?”

Jiang Xi ignored the knocks. Noticing that the door was unlocked, the scroll spirit dropped the pretense of politeness. “Then if the lady doesn’t mind, I’ll invite myself in.”

There was still no answer from Jiang Xi. Xue Meng muttered under his breath, “Eh? Why does its voice sound so familiar?”

In the room, the scroll spirit had pushed the door open and gone in. The flute melody finally ceased. Uneasy as he was, Xue Meng reminded himself that Jiang Yechen just had to get through ten minutes. As long as the spirit stayed that long, the incense would addle its mind, and they’d be able to subdue it in one fell sw—

Bang!

“What’s going on?” Xue Meng cried. “It’s only been a minute! Don’t tell me the scroll spirit threw up when it saw Jiang Xi too?”

As the incredulous crowd looked on, the glow of an unsheathed holy weapon filled the courtyard, revealing the door thrown off its hinges and the table kicked to the ground. The spirit’s cloaked figure hovered suspended in midair.

This time, the spirit didn’t let out a retching sound, but rather a shrill scream. It fell to the ground with a crash.

“Aiyo…” the scroll spirit whimpered weakly. “Ow, ow ow ow… It hurts so bad…”

Jiang Yechen lunged forward with his sword drawn, clearly out for blood. Mei Hanxue blinked, eyes round with astonishment, then turned to Mei Hänxue. “Am I blind? Where’s his costume?”

“You’re not blind,” said Mei Hänxue, looking impassively at Jiang Xi. “He didn’t even try.”

“He did!” Xue Meng piped up.

Both twins raised their eyebrows. “How?” asked Mei Hanxue.

Xue Meng pointed at Jiang Xi’s wrist. “See, he’s wearing a white jade bracelet. That’s women’s jewelry.”

The twins fell silent. After a beat, Mei Hanxue laughed. “I see Xue-zhangmen understands the art of cross-dressing as well.”

“He’s the same as Jiang Yechen,” Mei Hänxue said flatly. “They think making themselves up as a woman is equivalent to dabbing on some lip color.”

Xue Meng blinked at him, bewildered. “Is it not?”

Mei Hänxue didn’t dignify the question with a response.

It was unclear what had happened between Jiang Xi and the scroll spirit next door, but Jiang Xi’s face was a rictus of fury. The holy weapon Xuehuang blazed a scintillating silver in his hand, vibrating with an audible hum. Jiang Xi hauled the cowering scroll spirit from the ground.

“Aiya, gorgeous! What’re you so mad for?” the scroll spirit cried. “How could you bear to injure this charming face of mine?”

“I’ll kill you!” Jiang Xi thundered.

As they tussled, the scroll spirit’s hooded cloak slid back, revealing its face.

The crowd was instantly dumbstruck.

Truly, this scroll spirit was asking for death. The fact that it had taken Jiang Xi’s form to visit prostitutes in Yangzhou the night before had left the sect leader enraged. Perhaps the spirit had found that women were

especially taken with Sect Leader Jiang's face, for it had once again donned his appearance for tonight's assignation.

The spirit wasn't intelligent enough to realize that the person it was trying to fool was none other than the model himself. Everyone could now guess what had happened—Jiang Xi had watched "himself" stroll into the room with an unctuous smile, striking a pose and purring, "Hey there, little miss." Maybe the spirit had even batted its lashes seductively at him.

No wonder he was furious. He looked like he might eat the scroll spirit alive.

Seeing that Jiang Xi was on the verge of executing the scroll spirit, Taobao Estate's disciples swarmed out of the shadows, scrambling to dissuade him.

"Wait!"

"Jiang-zunzhu! If you hit it, everyone's secrets will get leaked!"

"Please calm down, Jiang-zunzhu!"

The scroll spirit seemed to be slow in the head, but its movements were surprisingly nimble. Realizing the situation was devolving, it squirmed away from Jiang Xi and scuttled into the darkness. It stayed in character to the last, yelling over its shoulder as it ran: "I—Jiang Yechen of Guyueye—will be back! Mwa ha ha ha ha!"

Jiang Xi's face was so contorted with fury that his straight, perfect nose was beginning to look crooked. He'd *never* flee from a fight so disgracefully! Unthinkable! "Impudent bastard!" Jiang Xi thundered.

"Jiang-zhangmen, Jiang-zhangmen—" the crowd of disciples chanted desperately.

"I'll tell you what'll happen if you dare use my face again!"

"Jiang-zunzhu, Jiang-zunzhu—" The chorus continued.

"I'll smite you with epilepsy, strangury, hysteria, epistaxis, metopism, scrotal gangrene, and the four afflictions of palsy, consumption, dropsy, diaphragmatic paresis—"

No one could understand the string of medical jargon that came after.

The crowd's exhortations grew increasingly urgent. Only Xue Meng took his words at face value. "What are these…four afflictions?"

"I'm guessing they must be major ailments listed in medical textbooks," Mei Hanxue answered.

At Xue Meng's uncomprehending expression, Mei Hänxue added from the other side, "He's just saying he wants it to die an incredibly painful and gruesome death."

Xue Meng's face twitched. He thought this was overly cruel of Jiang Xi, but after a moment, he turned back to watch the scene without a word.

The crowd of SMILE Squad disciples continued their chorus. "Aiya, enough, enough, enough. Sect Leader, please calm down, relax, relax, relax."

But Jiang Xi's temper wasn't so easily soothed. Sect Leader Jiang was never possessed of much patience, and the months he'd spent bedridden had left him more irascible than before. Plus, the scroll spirit was using Jiang Xi's own face to perpetrate such unthinkable deeds. He had been pushed to his limit and was unable to regain his composure.

A flash of jade-green light cut through the chaos. The startled disciples ducked out of the way. Jiang Yechen stumbled, then fell to his knees.

Everyone exchanged reproachful glances—

Heavens above, why didn't you catch Jiang-zhangmen?!

You were clearly closest to him! How's it my fault?

Eh? What was that green light…

The little bee that was Master Ma buzzed over. Elder Chen Xuyuan froze, his face draining of color. He clapped a hand to his bald head. "Oh no, this is bad!" he cried. "Jiang-zunzhu also failed to apprehend the scroll spirit! He'll be cursed too—he's going to turn into an animal!"

Xue Meng leapt out of the haystack he'd been hiding within. "What?!"

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Xue Mengmeng's Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 18

TAOBAO ESTATE'S DISCIPLES stood in the moonlight, respectfully facing the steps of the hall.

On those steps was perched a little bee. Beside it sat an ethereal bird with pearly white plumage. It was difficult to say what kind of bird it was—it appeared to be a cross between a crane, a phoenix, and a peacock. At any rate, it was a creature unlike any that existed in the mortal realm.

That was because the bird was Jiang Xi.

As a bird, he was long-necked and regal, with bright, sharp eyes. His neat feathers glimmered with a silvery, iridescent sheen, as if touched by the first frost of winter. The only spots of color to be seen on his plumage were the faded indigo tips of his tail feathers.

"Kinda looks like the robes Jiang-zhangmen was wearing," someone muttered in the crowd.

"What beautiful feathers," a lady cultivator murmured. "I wouldn't mind plucking one for myself."

Xue Meng, honest child that he was, looked solemnly at Jiang Yechen and asked a most heartfelt question: "What kind of chicken are you?"

In return, he received Jiang Yechen's murderous, ice-cold stare.

"Or are you a duck?"

Had it been anyone else, they'd have been dead on the spot—but Jiang Xi seemed to be powerless when it came to Xue Meng. He threw him another withering glare, then spread his gleaming wings. He was done with these idiots. Silent wingbeats carried him into the air, and he soared out of Taobao Estate and vanished.

It seemed he had no plans to return. In fact, perhaps he'd never come back to Taobao Estate for the rest of his life.

Everyone turned reverent gazes upon Xue Ziming, as if he were a great hero. Xue Meng was confused. “He’s gonna fly all the way back to Guyueye like that?”

The lady cultivator who’d wanted to pluck the sect leader’s feathers was still starry-eyed. “Jiang-zhangmen is so beautiful. He left behind little motes of silver light when he flew away.”

“That’s probably from the train of his robes,” said her sect sister. “Didn’t you see how Jiang-zhangmen’s robes trailed behind him… Hey, do you think he ever trips over himself?”

Two Guyueye flunkies couldn’t take the chitchat any longer—they knew their sect leader’s personality too well. “You are all expressly forbidden from telling anyone about tonight’s events!” they said sternly. “Otherwise, next time you get sick, don’t even think of coming to Guyueye! You’re on your own!”

Jiang Yechen’s entourage swept noisily out of Taobao Estate, following their leader back to the sect in Yangzhou.

No one had expected that even Sect Leader Jiang, head of the foremost sect in the cultivation realm, would fall to the scroll spirit. Although the spirit hadn’t brought any serious harm upon him, there were precious few individuals in the world who’d managed to shame him so.

Those left behind grew increasingly anxious. Of the leaders of the nine great sects, both Ma Yun and Jiang Xi had been defeated. Both were highly skilled in their own areas; neither was a lightweight. Now…could the juniors Xue Meng and the Mei twins truly manage to subdue the scroll spirit? Everyone was on tenterhooks.

Despondence settled over the Taobao Estate party like a dark cloud. Even the little bee that was Master Ma seemed to wilt, his wings drooping.

Mei Hanxue, who’d gone to look through the things Jiang Xi had left behind in the room, suddenly laughed aloud.

Xue Meng turned to eye him. “You seem to be in a good mood. What’re you laughing at?”

“Come here; take a look at this.”

Curiosity and stubbornness warred in Xue Meng; curiosity won. He leaned over.

Green eyes sparkling, Mei Hanxue held up a slip of paper. “I’ve never seen this method of cross-dressing before. Jiang-zunzhu is quite fascinating.”

“What is this… How do you use a piece of paper to cross-dress?” Baffled, Xue Meng snatched the slip out of Mei Hanxue’s hand. A single glance rendered him speechless.

Really—what was this?!

Xue Meng recognized the paper as one of Guyueye’s prescription slips. On it, Jiang Xi had written in flamboyant calligraphy:

Hereby certifying that this person is female.

Signed, Medicine Master and Sect Leader of Guyueye, Jiang Xi

The bright red seal of the sect leader was affixed below.

Watching Xue Meng’s mouth fall open, Mei Hanxue held in his laughter until his ribs ached fit to break.

“Fucking hell.” Xue Meng’s knuckles went white as he crushed the prescription, looking like he’d reached the end of his rope. “Is Jiang Yechen a pig or what?!”

Giggling, Mei Hanxue held a long finger to his lips, signaling for Xue Meng to lower his voice. “He’s a fairy bird, not a chicken or a duck or a pig. You just saw him. Besides…” He paused, smile fading as he looked at Xue Meng with renewed seriousness. “Why do I suddenly think…you look rather like him?”

Xue Meng jumped like a cat whose tail had been trod on. He shook his head like a rattle drum. “Y-y-y-you’re full of shit! He and I are *nothing* alike, we have nothing to do with each other!”

“Really.” Mei Hanxue’s green eyes darkened a fraction, his gaze inscrutable above his easy grin. “I wonder what kind of bird you’d turn into if you lost to the scroll spirit.”

Suddenly Xue Meng was certain that he absolutely, positively could not lose. Mei Hanxue would have no scruples about plucking out all his

feathers and using them to bribe women. He, Xue Ziming, *could not lose*!

It was not only Xue Ziming who felt he had to ensure victory and avoid getting turned into a furry friend—all of Taobao Estate's elders and disciples were of the same mind.

"This scroll spirit is an amalgamation of Xue-zhangmen and Mei-xianzhang's tastes," Elder Chen Xuyuan said. "If we have to appease it, you two should think carefully about your type—what kind of girl would make the scroll spirit fall in love at first sight?"

Mei Hanxue laughed. "I think every girl has her own special beauty. If the scroll spirit is so choosy, it's not because of me." He looked at Xue Meng. "We must consult Xue-zhangmen for his advice."

Xue Meng was quiet for a moment. "The best woman in the world was my mom."

The smile slid off Mei Hanxue's face. Below the teardrop-shaped ornament on his brow, those pellucid eyes flickered over Xue Meng's profile.

Mei Hanxue sighed softly. He'd disguised himself as Miss S because he knew Xue Meng had been unhappy for some time. Although Xue Meng would sometimes bicker and rant as he had in the old days, the broken parts of his heart weren't so easily repaired. Mei Hanxue, as a gesture of friendship, had hoped to cheer him up a little and help him heal. But Xue Meng's wounds were very deep indeed.

Mei Hanxue exhaled and raised a hand. "That she was."

"But Madam Wang is…" Elder Chen Xuyuan began awkwardly.

Mei Hänxue cut him off. "Think of someone else," he said to Xue Meng. He knew that the rest of that sentence would've only made Xue Meng feel worse.

"There's no one else," Xue Meng finally said. "No one's better than me."

"Take your time. It doesn't have to be a real person," said Mei Hänxue. "We can use a disguise."

Xue Meng started to think in earnest. After a long silence, he began to list his requirements. "One, pale skin."

“Mm-hmm.”

“Two, big eyes.”

“Okay.”

“Three, she has to be at least as… Uh, at least as, er… That guy,” he said with a wry twist of his mouth. “At least as pretty…as Shi Mei.”

Everyone listened to Xue Meng’s criteria in silence. At first, the elders wrote down each requirement, intending to think of a woman that would satisfy them. After he listed more than a dozen, however, they put their brushes down.

Xue Meng wasn’t looking for a woman. He was looking for a Buddha. Who but a truly enlightened being would have the magnanimity to tolerate Xue Ziming’s ridiculously unrealistic standards? Was this really a twenty-something-year-old man speaking? Did he have some kind of fundamental misunderstanding of women? And he was still going!

“Twenty, she has to sincerely admire me.

“Twenty-one, she has to be thrifty. No wasting soap when she does laundry.

“Twenty-two, all things in moderation. I don’t want her to eat too much—two bowls of rice per meal at most.

“Twenty-three, I don’t like powder or rouge on girls. It’d be best if she doesn’t wear makeup.

“Twenty-four, she has to be pretty, though. Naturally red lips, naturally fair skin, and naturally pink cheeks.

“Twenty-five, long legs.

“Twenty-six, she absolutely can’t be taller than me.”

The entire assembly was trying not to roll their eyes or yawn. At last, a female disciple snapped. “Enough already!” she shouted. “Good grief! You might as well take the moon and stars as your bride!”

Xue Meng crossed his arms and stared at her. “Nice work. You have my attention.”

In the past, this random cultivator would’ve had no problem arguing with Xue Meng, but now that he was a sect leader, things had changed. The

disciple nervously licked her lips and shrank back. “Xue-zhangmen, my apologies. I was talking in my sleep just now,” she whimpered.

Xue Meng turned away. “Twenty-seven,” he continued, “no sleep-talking.”

The poor girl was dumbfounded.

When Xue Meng reached the three hundred and seventieth requirement, Mei Hänxue cut him off. The crowd let out a collective sigh of relief. If no one intervened, they feared Sect Leader Xue might keep talking through the night into the next morning. Even Mei Hänxue was visibly irked. Though his expression was as icy as ever, an irritated furrow had appeared between his brows. “You’ve said enough, Xue Ziming.”

“But I’m not done—”

Mei Hänxue didn’t care. “Did you know the goddess Nüwa?” he asked coolly.

Xue Meng blinked. “What?”

“I thought you might’ve killed her with your endless nitpicking.”

Seeing that they were on the precipice of another squabble, Mei Hanxue raised his hand with an exasperated smile. “Okay, okay, calm down, both of you. Xue Meng, let me ask you this: Can you name a single person you wouldn’t disdain, pick a fight with, or ditch without a second thought?” He paused, then turned to the crowd. “Perhaps this is a lower bar to clear than Xue-zhangmen’s potential wife.”

The listeners, bored to tears by the past two hours of Xue Meng’s recitation, nodded fervently.

Xue Meng glared at him. “Well, *you* certainly wouldn’t qualify.”

Mei Hanxue laughed good-naturedly. “Understood.”

Xue Meng thought for a while, then straightened, eyes widening. He had managed to think of someone he didn’t look down on at all.

“I got it—faster than I was expecting! My shizun, Chu Wanning!”

One lady cultivator sat sleepily on the ground, hugging her knees as she drifted off. At this, she startled awake, hurrying to wipe away her drool. “Huh? Who’s expecting? Chu-zongshi’s expecting?”

Her exclamation was met with silence. The cultivator looked up and collided with Xue Meng’s vicious gaze. She hiccupped in fright, then curled into a ball and wriggled herself into the farthest corner of the room.

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Xue Mengmeng's Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 19

CHU WANNING. Mo Ran. Taobao Estate.

The combination of these three things inevitably made Xue Meng recall a traumatic incident from the past: Taxian-jun had once told him that Chu Wanning and Mo Ran had had sex in Taobao Estate right in front of him—with only a bed-curtain separating them.

The psychological damage Xue Meng had sustained as a result of this knowledge was incalculable. If he could go back in time, he'd have definitely cut off Taxian-jun before the first word even left his lips. *Stop talking!* he'd have yelled. *I got the picture!*

But the past was already written, and he had to live with it. In order to defeat the scroll spirit, Xue Meng allowed Elder Chen Xuyuan to send a letter to his shizun and cousin, inviting Chu-zongshi to come down the mountain and provide assistance.

At that point, they could only wait.

Nanping Mountain was right next to West Lake, very close to Taobao Estate. Even without riding a sword, one could walk at a leisurely pace from the misty summit down to the sect in about four hours. Yet for some reason, even by daybreak they had no reply from Chu Wanning and Mo Ran.

Mei Hanxue was a clever young man. He looked at the date, then stood up and said to the crowd, "You should all go and rest. I don't think we'll get a reply before noon."

Taobao Estate's disciples had been up all night. When they heard Mei Hanxue's pronouncement, they didn't bother thinking about the implications. Stifling their yawns, they all drifted back to their rooms, hoping to catch some sleep.

Only Xue Meng pondered it in detail. Furrowing his brow, he looked at Mei Hanxue. "Why? My shizun isn't the type to sleep in."

Mei Hanxue gave him a small smile. “There’s much about your shizun you don’t know.”

“Ridiculous! If you don’t believe me, let’s make a bet.”

“Oh?” Seeing Xue Meng’s indignant expression, Mei Hanxue was intrigued. “What will you bet?” he teased. “I recall you didn’t bring much money on this trip. What do you have to put up?”

“Who said I didn’t bring money, hold on…” Jaw clenched, Xue Meng rummaged around in his pouch.

In truth, it wasn’t that he didn’t bring money. It was rather that, as the newly anointed sect leader, and despite the airs he put on before others, his experience was still very limited. The Xuanji Elder worried he might spend rashly, or else be bamboozled by Hua Ruowei or some other untrustworthy woman. Thus the elders, and not Xue Meng, managed the sect’s accounts. Although Xue Meng was the sect leader, he received only a modest allowance from the Xuanji Elder each month. And much to his chagrin, he’d spent most of it on his extravagant date with Jiang Xi.

And Jiang Xi hadn’t even been impressed! The way Jiang Xi—as Miss Dayflower—had looked at him with such disdain, he’d clearly thought Xue Meng was poor. And that was to say nothing of his dates with Taxian-jun and the rest of those weirdos… Xue Ziming, darling of the heavens, had been fleeced so badly by these seducers and seductresses he practically needed to count his toilet paper before going to the bathroom.

But in the name of defending Chu Wanning’s honor, Sect Leader Xue had to ante up. He’d halve his toilet paper consumption if needed!

Mei Hanxue watched as Xue Meng dug out a sad little pile of copper coins from every nook and cranny of his pockets. Altogether, it was probably less than fifty coppers, but Xue Meng slammed it on the table like it was five million. Two coins bounced off and plunked to the ground.

Mei Hanxue blinked.

“I bet you my shizun will be here by the time breakfast’s over!” Xue Meng said firmly.

“And if he doesn’t make it?”

“All this will be yours!”

Mei Hanxue looked at the pathetic heap of coppers, then at Xue Meng. “I heard Chu-zongshi once said that small bets beget cheer and large bets beget ruin, so you might as well go for ruin,” he said with a grin. “Let’s forget about the money and bet something a little more thrilling, how about that?”

“Like what?”

“Like running naked through the streets, or selling your talents in a brothel.”

Xue Meng visibly recoiled.

Mei Hänxue frowned. “What nonsense are you spouting?”

Mei Hanxue covered his mouth with a hand, smothering his laughter. “I’m just teasing. Now let me think…” He crossed his arms, his eyes twin crescents of amusement. “How about this? Whoever loses will dress up as a girl according to the winner’s specifications.”

Xue Meng furrowed his brow, vexed. “Seriously, Mei Hanxue, did I force you to cross-dress before or something? Why are you so fixated on this?”

Now both Mei Hanxue and Mei Hänxue fixed him with inscrutable stares. Xue Meng felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. “Wh-what are you guys looking at me like that for?” he stammered. “I was just joking. Of course I never did such a thing. I-I’ve always been an upright and honest person—I’ve never picked on the weak…”

“That’s right,” Mei Hanxue said blithely. “You’re the best.”

Xue Meng blinked. Why did he have a bad feeling about this…?

Unfortunately, his premonition was correct. He waited, his hope turning to disappointment, then to despair. Finally, early in the afternoon, he heard a disciple cry out from outside the estate, “Chu-zongshi and Mo-zongshi have arrived—!”

Chu Wanning’s hair was bound neatly up in a jade crown, his white robes floating gracefully behind him. His bearing was as cool and ethereal as ever, but for some reason, the ends of his eyes were subtly red, and his expression was gloomy, with a hint of irritation. Mo Ran trailed a step behind, looking both helpless and amused.

Unbeknownst to the assembled cultivators, Chu Wanning had heard Taobao Estate's spiritual bird calling outside their cottage the night before. Worried some urgent matter had arisen, he'd meant to go out at once to see what was going on. However, Taxian-jun's personality had been in control at the time. The former emperor of the mortal world cared little for other people's troubles at the best of times, and once he was in the mood, he wouldn't stop for anything.

Chu Wanning had tried to cut their activities short several times. At first, Taxian-jun appeased him, saying things like "almost there" and "as soon as we're done." But of course Mo Ran was lying through his teeth—there was no such thing as *almost* or *done* with him in the bedroom. Ma Yun's cock could crow until it dropped dead, but Taxian-jun's cock wouldn't show the slightest sign of flagging.

Eventually, after Chu Wanning repeatedly told him to wrap it up so he could go outside, Taxian-jun flew into a rage and tied him to the bed. To put the notion out of Chu Wanning's head completely, he fed him a few drugs that could not be disclosed in polite company. As a result, even after midnight came around and Mo-zongshi's personality took over, he found it impossible to stop once he saw the state Chu Wanning was in.

Not until Chu Wanning groggily woke the following afternoon did he finally receive the message from Taobao Estate and learn about the mess the scroll spirit had made in Lin'an.

The delay was Taxian-jun's fault, but Mo-zongshi and Taxian-jun were the same person—either way, the blame fell squarely on Mo Ran. Chu Wanning had refused to say a word to him the whole way down the mountain, treating him like a particularly persistent statue.

"Chu-zongshi! Mo-zongshi!"

"Welcome, Chu-zongshi and Mo-zongshi!"

The message had explained the cause of the scroll spirit's rampage in detail. When Chu Wanning walked into the hall and saw Xue Meng, he didn't know what to do. He had half a heart to reprimand him, yet he was also mindful of his disciple's present status—it wouldn't do to embarrass him. Eventually, Chu Wanning knit his sword-like brows. "How did this get so out of hand?"

Xue Meng had been disconsolate, but now that Chu Wanning had arrived—finally—his unhappiness evaporated. “Shizun, the scroll spirit’s copying me,” he explained in a rush. “But I didn’t do it on purpose…”

Mo Ran’s brows went up. “Xue Meng, I thought you’d stopped playing with the Matching Scroll after we said goodbye at Wuchang Town.”

“Why should I?”

Mo Ran wanted to roll his eyes in frustration, but the brotherly code forbade him from leaking what he thought was the secret Xue Meng had shared with him. Behind Chu Wanning’s back, he mouthed to Xue Meng: *You idiot! You think playing around like this is giving Jiang-zhangmen the respect he deserves?*

Xue Meng had no idea what he was saying. “Why are you speaking so quietly? Did you lose your voice?”

Mo Ran seethed in silence. *Dumbass! You dug your own grave!*

Regardless of Mo Ran’s feelings on the matter, Xue Meng’s problem had ballooned out of control—they would do all in their power to help. The only issue was—

“You want Shizun to dress up like a woman?”

“It’s not like I *want* him to,” Xue Meng said, abashed. “Maybe—maybe we can have Guyueye write a prescription slip that says ‘hereby certifying that this person is…is…’” He snuck a glance at Chu Wanning’s stern expression, and the phrase *is female* simply refused to leave his lips.

Mo Ran’s eyes had widened in alarm, as though the sky was about to fall on his head. How could he possibly allow Chu Wanning to appear in public dressed in such a way? He glanced at Xue Meng’s embarrassed, stymied expression. After a long pause, he said, “I’ll do it.”

Xue Meng looked up in bafflement.

“I’ll take care of the scroll spirit for him,” Mo Ran said solemnly.

“You? You’re going to dress up as a woman?”

“Why not?”

“Dage, have you looked in a mirror?”

Mo Ran froze, eyes welling with hurt. He turned to Chu Wanning. “Shizun, Xue Meng says I’m ugly.” He sounded dejected.

Chu Wanning knew Mo Ran was only looking for an excuse to speak with him, and that this was the verbal equivalent of pouting. He couldn’t be bothered with him right now. He methodically drank his cup of zhuyeqing green tea, then looked up. “Why does anyone need to dress up? Don’t we have a convenient solution right in front of us?”

Everyone gave him a quizzical look.

Chu Wanning turned his face ever so slightly toward Mo Ran. “Give me your qiankun pouch.”

These were the first words Chu Wanning had said to him since they’d left Nanping Mountain, and Mo Ran was at first delighted. But Chu Wanning’s glum expression and clipped tone instantly left Mo Ran slightly crestfallen again. He looked like a lord getting scolded by his charming concubine while she rummaged through his money bag—unsure if he was supposed to be happy or sad.

A cultivator’s qiankun pouch was akin to their life savings. Chu Wanning was asking for Mo Weiyu’s entire accumulated wealth, and without any courtesy at that. But he had no choice but to hand it over, no matter how put upon he felt.

Why oh why had he been such a beast last night?

Everyone looked on wide-eyed as Chu Wanning rifled through Mo Ran’s possessions, eager to see what this so-called convenient solution might be. All of these zongshi seemed to be slightly unhinged. Jiang Xi’s cross-dressing had involved a fake prescription. What kind of shocking idea would Chu Wanning cook up? Maybe he’d command ten Holy Night Guardians to walk behind him with a banner saying something like “Introducing Yuheng of the Night Sky, the Beidou Immortal, Miss Chu Wanning”?[8]

As everyone’s imaginations were running wild, Chu Wanning said impatiently, brows drawn into a forbidding scowl, “What’s all this junk in your qiankun pouch?”

Mo Ran rubbed his nose self-consciously. In the past he’d always kept his qiankun pouch neat and organized. But ever since all his souls had

returned to this body, the switching of his personalities also extended to the contents of his qiankun pouch.

For example, Taxian-jun would secretly stuff chili pepper seeds into the pouch, concocting some outlandish fantasy of growing chilis on Nanping Mountain. Once Mo-zongshi took over, he'd pour all the seeds out. When Taxian-jun returned, he'd furiously swear to get back at his other self. He'd scramble all the items in the qiankun pouch and smash to pieces anything Mo-zongshi had gathered, or else go down the mountain and pawn it for nice clothes for himself. As a result, the qiankun pouch was eternally a hopeless mess.

It was hard to find anything in such chaos. Chu Wanning dumped several of the bulkier items onto the table.

Xue Meng leaned over for a look. "*Some Notes on Gods and Demons*."

"That's my book," Mo Ran explained. "I'm trying to get a better understanding of the ancient struggles between gods and demons."

"Oh…nice." Xue Meng picked up another book. "*Songs of a Starlit Night*."

"That one contains tales of all kinds of cultivators from the past. They're famous for different reasons, some good and some bad, but all of them are interesting figures with their own visions and motives. The cultivators are like stars illuminating the night—some bright, some dim, yet all with their own brilliance. It's quite an interesting read."

"Wow, you've made a lot of progress," said Xue Meng, clearly surprised. "Why do you sound like you know what you're talking about?"

Mo Ran laughed. "Shizun's taught me well."

Xue Meng uncovered the next book. "*Birth Aftercare for Sows*."

Mo Ran's smile stiffened. After a moment, he said resolutely, "Taxian-jun bought this book. It's not mine."

Xue Meng stared at him, at a loss for words.

Chu Wanning had been determinedly ignoring their conversation, but at this, he looked up. "What did he buy this for? We aren't raising any pigs."

“I… He… Here’s why,” said Mo Ran. “He went down the mountain in disguise and saw that the villagers were holding a livestock breeding competition. For some reason, he was very confident in his abilities, so he went to give it a try and lost to the village’s Veterinarian Wang. That made him mad, so he went and bought this book. He vowed to study hard, so he’d win the top prize next year and avenge his loss…”

The more he explained, the more embarrassing it sounded. When he heard one of Taobao Estate’s disciples snickering, Mo Ran trailed off and glanced nervously at Chu Wanning.

“Why did you participate in a livestock breeding competition?” Chu Wanning asked incredulously.

“Th-there was prize money.” A faint blush was spreading across Mo Ran’s cheeks. He lowered his head. “I thought… If I won… I could use it to buy you some nice robes from Feiyun Temple.”

This answer only made Chu Wanning more bewildered. “Feiyun Temple is close to Jiangdong Pavilion. That Hua Ruowei sent over eight entire trunks of clothing a while ago. You burned them all without a word, yet now you want to buy their clothes?”

“That’s different,” Mo Ran said, instantly cross. “There’s something wrong with the way that girl looks at you. As if I don’t know what she’s up to. Did you see the things she sent? Outer robes, hair crowns, undergarments…” Mo Ran’s face darkened as he spoke. “She’s delusional if she thinks you’d wear those clothes!”

It was hard to say whether Chu Wanning looked more exasperated or embarrassed, but his dark eyes softened at last. He pressed his lips together, then asked, “Are you the Mo Ran from this lifetime or the past lifetime right now?”

“Of course I’m from this lifetime,” Mo Ran answered, taken aback. “Why are you asking, Shizun?”

“Right now, you seem just like the past life’s Mo Ran,” said Chu Wanning, eyes glimmering faintly with amusement.

His demeanor was as cool and aloof as ever, so no one in the crowd noticed Chu Wanning’s mirth. But to Mo Ran, the slight shift in Chu Wanning’s mood was like the difference between a snowstorm and a sunny

day. Realizing Chu Wanning wasn't angry with him any longer, Mo Ran lowered his lashes and laughed, cheeks dimpling softly.

Before Mo Ran could say any more, Chu Wanning turned his face away, awkward before all these watching eyes. But the way he was ignoring Mo Ran now was entirely different from his frigid silence on the way here. Mo Ran chuckled quietly to himself again as he stood obediently by his side.

At last Chu Wanning found what he was looking for within the qiankun pouch.

"The illusory brocade sachet," he announced. His slender fingers drew out an embroidered pouch by its cord. "Sold with the Matching Scroll. It disguises the wearer's appearance without requiring any physical changes whatsoever."

Chu Wanning paused, looking around at the speechless contingent from Taobao Estate. "No one thought of this?" he asked in disbelief.

The inventors of the Matching Scroll and its accompanying illusory sachet shook their heads one after another. The answer to this problem had been quite literally in their hands this whole time.

At least the issue of dolling someone up had now been solved. Everyone let out a muted sigh of relief. By this point, it was almost dinnertime. The group shuffled into the dining hall to eat before the scroll spirit showed itself again that night.

On their way, Mei Hanxue ducked over to Xue Meng. "Xue Ziming," he murmured into his ear.

Xue Meng was instantly wary. "What do you want?"

Mei Hanxue laughed quietly. "Can I tell you a secret?"

Intuition told Xue Meng it would be better not to listen to any of Mei Hanxue's secrets. Alas, curiosity won again. "What—what secret?"

"I actually thought of Chu-zongshi's solution a long time ago," Mei Hanxue revealed conversationally.

Xue Meng gasped, then turned to glare at him. "Then why didn't you say anything?!"

“Wasn’t it Jiang Yechen who had to dress up last time?” Mei Hanxue grinned. “I wanted to give him a hard time—and give you something to laugh at.”

Xue Meng had been prepared to chew him out, but at this, his insults stuck in his throat.

Mei Hanxue laughed. “Aren’t you going to thank me?”

“No freaking way! What about after Jiang Xi? Why didn’t you say anything then?”

“Oh, after Jiang Xi…” Mei Hanxue paused, mirth dancing in his limpid green eyes. He tapped a finger to his lips. “I didn’t say it then because I wanted to give you a hard time—and give myself something to laugh at.” As Xue Meng’s face went white with anger, Mei Hanxue added, “And by the way, you lost the bet. Don’t forget our agreement—I’ll be waiting.”

“Fuck you!” Xue Meng shouted, all self-restraint gone. “Wait forever for all I care—you want me to dress up like a girl for you? Keep dreaming! Maybe in the next life!”

The ruckus drew the surprised gazes of everyone around them. Now the bet was known to everyone.

“Aiya, Xue-zhangmen said he’d cross-dress?” someone muttered.

“There’s no way—he was going to eat his words for sure.”

“Poor Mei-gongzi. He won the bet, but he’s still getting an earful.”

“How sad…”

Xue Meng’s face grew increasingly dark amidst the chatter. Mei Hanxue smiled broadly. “You really won’t do it?”

“Shut *up*!”

“So stubborn,” said Mei Hanxue. He elbowed Mei Hänxue. “Ge, look at him. Isn’t he funny?”

Mei Hänxue glanced at Xue Meng, who was starting to resemble an angry pufferfish. “He’s not funny,” he said flatly. “And you shouldn’t make him dress like a girl.”

“Why not? He’s so spicy.”

“You—!” Xue Meng sputtered. “*You!*”

“He is spicy, though,” Mei Hänxue said expressionlessly. “My eyes are burning just looking at him.”

Xue Meng’s head was about to explode. Mei Hänxue was worse than Mei Hanxue! Mei Hanxue might have called him spicy, but Mei Hänxue had the nerve to say he made his eyes burn! Now Xue Meng was truly livid. “Mei Hänxue!” he roared. “Get back here! *Who* makes your eyes burn? Have you ever even *seen* me dress like a girl? You think I’m scared? If you think you’re so great, why don’t we see who’s better-looking between the two of us?!”

Mei Hanxue’s laughter pealed out. “Hey, are you really going to—”

“No.” Mei Hänxue cut him off, grabbing his arm. He turned to Xue Meng. “Like you said, save your cross-dressing for the next life.”

“Huh?!” Xue Meng pointed at Mei Hänxue, scowling furiously. “Who said I’d do it in the next life?”

Mei Hänxue raised his brows. “You just said it yourself. Anyway, please focus on being a proper sect leader in this lifetime. Don’t be such a brat.”

Xue Meng could no longer form coherent sentences. “Y-you—the *nerve* of you—did you just say—”

“Yes, I did,” said Mei Hänxue. He blinked, his gem-like eyes filled with mockery. “It’s a promise, then. You owe us this bet. We’ll wait for you in the next life, Miss Xue.”

Xue Meng was thunderstruck. He shouted after Mei Hänxue as he turned away, “*What did you call me?* Mei Hänxue! Stop right there! I’m going to fucking kill you! Don’t you move a muscle!”

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Xue Mengmeng's Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 20

IN THE INTEREST of being thorough, Taobao Estate's Elder Chen asked Xue Meng to assess the disguised Chu Wanning before his shizun was due to face the scroll spirit. Xue Meng was to see if there was anything he found unsatisfactory about Chu Wanning's female appearance and to report back on whether it fit his tastes.

Xue Meng was still so furious with Mei Hänxue his heart ached, and now Chen Xuyuan had come barreling over with this ridiculous request. Rubbing his chest, Xue Meng fumed, "Nonsense! How could there be anything unsatisfactory about my shizun?! He's the best in every way!"

"Aiya, Xue-zhangmen, he might be *your* shizun, but he's not the scroll spirit's shizun," Chen Xuyuan replied. "You have to put your own opinions aside. The scroll spirit has no history with your shizun. Try to look at Chu-zongshi with a stranger's eyes and see whether or not he meets your requirements."

"Why would I think Shizun's great in every way just because of our *history*?" Xue Meng's eyes widened. "I'm telling you, if the scroll matched me with my shizun, I'd *definitely* think he was the most amazing person in the world even if I had no idea who he was, one hundred percent guaranteed!"

Xue Meng's tone was forceful, but Chen Xuyuan persisted. "No no, we have to do a test run, gotta debug it just in case." He shooed Xue Meng toward the room where Chu Wanning was waiting.

But when Xue Meng reached the door, he froze. Was this not the very same room in which Chu Wanning had slept when they'd stayed at Taobao Estate all those years ago?

At the time, Xue Meng hadn't known what Mo Ran and Chu Wanning were up to, and he'd barged inside with nary a thought. Mo Ran had been forced to take refuge behind the curtain surrounding the bed. Only much later had Xue Meng come to know that the misty sheen and reddened

corners of Chu Wanning's eyes that night had not been due to fever, but rather…

Enough! No point dwelling on the past. Wary of history repeating itself, Xue Meng resolved to let them know loud and clear that he was here. Especially Mo Ran—he *could not* allow Mo Ran to do such a shameless thing again! Not on his life!

Xue Meng paced back and forth in front of the door, coughing loudly. Then he decided he might as well stomp on the bluestone path too. He leapt into the air—spun around—and landed with a thud—

The door creaked open.

Mo Ran's tall, broad figure appeared in the doorframe, smartly dressed despite the hour. He stared at Xue Meng as though at a ghost. "What are you doing?"

He had caught Xue Meng in a low squat, arms outspread like a freshly landed goose. Xue Meng turned his head. His mouth opened, but before he could answer, Chu Wanning's cool voice drifted out from the room.

"Mo Ran, is the resentful spirit of a maiden haunting our doorstep?"

He laughed. "Ah, no—it's just Xue Meng." He lowered his voice and smiled down at Xue Meng. "No need to be shy; just knock next time. With all the coughing and stomping, we thought the courtyard was haunted."

Xue Meng straightened up, no longer resembling a peacock fanning its tail. He was only stopped from spitting in his cousin's face by Chu Wanning calling, "Don't block the sect leader's way—let him in."

Xue Meng blinked. Since he'd assumed the position of sect leader, it was only proper that Chu Wanning, as the Yuheng Elder of Sisheng Peak, refer to him by his title. But no matter how many times he heard it, Xue Meng's chest still tightened.

Grinning, Mo Ran shifted aside. "Come on in."

"I have something private to discuss with Shizun," Xue Meng said curtly. "You may leave."

"Oh… Are you here to rehearse for the scroll spirit?" Mo Ran magnanimously refrained from bickering with Xue Meng. "Elder Chen told

us we should run through possible scenarios to avoid any mishaps," he said with a smile.

"What mishaps?" Xue Meng crossed his arms and rolled his eyes. "The spirit is copying me, so of course it'll think Shizun is flawless."

"Not necessarily." Mo Ran seemed to be of the same mind as Elder Chen. He clapped Xue Meng on the shoulder. "You think he's flawless because he's your shizun. If you'd met Shizun instead of Miss Treated on that blind date, without knowing who he was, I'm pretty sure you'd have argued with him too."

"Impossible!"

Mo Ran didn't take the bait. He tilted his head and, still smiling, stepped out of Xue Meng's way to wait outside.

Xue Meng found Chu Wanning by the window, having already activated the illusory sachet. His eyes went round.

He saw a slender, lovely lady cultivator sitting by the sill. Her skin was clear and bright, like a queen of the night flower unfolding amidst serene darkness, ethereal and pale as ice. Her neck rose in a long, elegant column from her snow-silk collar, and the candlelight wreathed her taut, luminous skin in plush shadows, casting a hazy glow over her smooth brow, long lashes, the gentle curve of her nose, and the pale, delicate contours of her lips. Radiance trailed along the fine line of her jaw, the warm light leaving only softness in its wake.

So this was what Chu Wanning would look like as a woman. Xue Meng stammered, "Sh-Shizun…"

"Mn." Chu Wanning put down the long silver spoon he was using to fiddle with the candle wick and turned to face him.

Her features alone were objectively beautiful, but this illusion of Chu Wanning also retained a solemn aloofness. The eyes under her slender brows had a charming shape, their ends slightly red, like the blush on dewy haitang blossoms. Yet her gaze was cool, exacting, and guarded.

This woman was a beauty to be sure, but a cold and intimidating one.

Chu Wanning glanced at Xue Meng. "Not very pretty, I'm afraid."

Dazed, Xue Meng blinked. "Ah?"

Chu Wanning frowned. “I’ll probably scare the scroll spirit away.”

Only then did Xue Meng’s brain catch up to his mouth. “What?” he blurted. “No, no no! How? You look great! Really really great!”

Chu Wanning had never been confident in his looks. He’d seen too many stunning beauties across two lifetimes—besides Mo Ran, there had been Shi Mingjing and Song Qiutong, both lovely beyond compare. Chu Wanning was aware that his looks were severe and forbidding—that much, at least, was evident from Xue Meng’s wordless shock. It seemed Mo Ran was truly the only one who would tolerate him.

He shook his head. “Sit.”

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Xue Meng took a cautious seat at the table.

Chu Wanning settled across from him. He brushed his sleeves back and poured two cups of tea, then looked up. “Appearance isn’t everything—personality counts for something too. What are you looking for in a girl?”

Earlier, in front of everyone at Taobao Estate, Xue Meng had ticked off more than three hundred requirements, scarcely pausing for breath. But faced with this question from Chu Wanning, he was suddenly rendered mute.

There was nothing more important to him than appearing wise in front of Chu Wanning. He didn’t have the audacity to list his criteria to his shizun one by one, then tell Chu Wanning to act accordingly before the scroll spirit.

“I—I-I don’t really have any requirements,” he guiltily stammered. “Just, er…alive and female. That’ll do.”

Chu Wanning’s hand froze with his teacup halfway to his mouth. He gazed at Xue Meng through the spiraling steam. “Is that so.”

“Y-yeah, compatibility is the most important thing. That’s pretty much it.”

“Hm.” Chu Wanning’s eyes flicked up coolly. “How did I come to hear that you had an exceptionally high number of requirements?”

Xue Meng flapped his hands. “No no no, never. That’s—they didn’t understand what I was saying. They’re just making things up.”

“So I don’t need to be diligent and good at cleaning?”

“How could I let you do the cleaning?” Xue Meng exclaimed. “I prefer girls who’ve never even seen a laundry tub!”

“I don’t have to stand to see you off at the door and kneel to welcome you home?”

“Oi, I’m not Japanese.”

“I don’t have to be quiet and respectful, and refrain from striking out or talking back?”

“Never! I like girls with a strong personality.”

“I don’t need to know how to cook?”

“I want a pampered princess!” said Xue Meng. “I couldn’t stand it if we fought over who holds the spatula!”

Chu Wanning’s eyebrows rose minutely. “I seem to remember you had no interest whatsoever in cooking.”

“I-it’s a new hobby,” Xue Meng explained haltingly. “I only recently picked it up.”

After a pause, Chu Wanning asked, “And you don’t care whether your elders would approve?”

“Nah, *I’m* in charge of who I like!”

After this thorough questioning, Xue Meng left at last. Mo Ran slipped back into the room, brimming with curiosity. “Wanning, Wanning, how did it go? How long’s his list of requirements?”

Chu Wanning shook his head. “Nothing very specific. The others misunderstood him. Xue Meng has grown a lot in the past two years. I’m glad to see it.”

This wasn’t at all the answer Mo Ran was expecting. As a former naughty disciple who’d often deceived his teacher and then lied to get out of punishment, Mo Ran sensed instinctively that there was something strange, something *off* about this report. Could it be that Xue Meng hadn’t grown up, but rather the gullible Chu Wanning had been duped?

Shortly after nightfall, a Taobao Estate disciple came to announce that the scroll spirit had appeared at a pleasure house in the southern quarter of the city and demanded the company of their finest courtesan. But all the women who’d met the scroll spirit previously had been afflicted with grave changes to their personalities, whether it was drawing chest hair on themselves or becoming shrill and short-tempered harridans. Thus, the madam refused to allow her courtesan to see the scroll spirit.

Luckily, several cultivators from Taobao Estate had made it over in time. They left a few people to contain the spirit, then returned to ask Chu-zongshi to make his appearance.

“We’ve already snuck the courtesan out of the pleasure house. Chu-zongshi, the rest is up to you. You have to keep the spirit talking for at least ten minutes so the narcotics can knock it out!”

The scroll spirit was mimicking Xue Meng, Chu Wanning reminded himself. Although the spirit was mercurial in nature, Xue Meng, when it came down to it, was a reasonable young man with a good heart. Distracting the scroll ought to be child’s play.

Yet in this, Chu Wanning was gravely mistaken.

Among his three disciples, Mo Ran had deceived Chu Wanning in the past because he was terrified he’d lose control and end up in his bed. He’d pretended not to like Chu Wanning. Shi Mei had harbored evil motives and been terrified of accidentally revealing his true self, so he too had pretended not to like Chu Wanning. Neither of them had cared about trifles like whether Chu Wanning knew how to cook or do laundry.

Xue Meng, however, was different. Xue Meng had pretended to like him.

Of course, one could like another person in a number of ways, and not all were equal. Xue Meng truly, genuinely *liked* his shizun, but at the same time, many of Chu Wanning’s habits were impossible for him to accept. In the interest of earning his shizun’s approval, he’d grit his teeth and ignore his conscience to say things like “Shizun’s the coolest!” or “Shizun’s clothes are super clean!” or “Shizun’s cabbage and tofu is so delicious!” while practically gagging.

The scroll spirit was not the same. It was a simulacrum of Xue Meng whose positive feelings toward Chu Wanning had been removed. Perhaps predictably, the initial conversation between the scroll spirit and Chu Wanning went like this:

“You’re the finest courtesan here?” asked the scroll spirit.

“Yes,” replied Chu Wanning.

“You’re not even as pretty as I am.”

Chu Wanning blinked. Was that what Xue Meng truly thought? Well…fine, his looks were nothing special. But looks weren’t everything.

And besides, he'd been prepared for this after Xue Meng's reaction. He could handle it.

He carried his qin over to the spirit and asked calmly, "Would you like to hear a song?"

"No. I detest music, especially those sleazy tunes from Kunlun Taxue Palace—they give me a headache."

The scroll spirit popped a candied fruit into its mouth. Evidently it had been frightened by Jiang Xi after all. Despite shouting *I—Jiang Yechen of Guyueye—will be back!* as it scampered away last night, it hadn't taken on Jiang Xi's appearance this time. As luck would have it, the scroll had disguised itself as Xue Meng instead. Thus, Chu Wanning was now faced with "Xue Meng" carelessly bouncing his leg up and down as he ate. "Let's get to know each other."

"Sure."

"Can you cook?"

"I only know how to make wontons and charcoal."

"Are you serious? How useless."

Chu Wanning's eyes went wide. *What?* Xue Meng thought he was useless? That couldn't be right.

"It's not that I don't know how to make anything else. I'm just not very good at it," Chu Wanning explained. "But I heard you like to cook—is that right? You said you don't want to fight over who holds the spatula."

"Says who? Nonsense!" said the scroll spirit. "A gentleman stays out of the kitchen. As a real man, why should I deign to cook?"

Chu Wanning was at a loss for words. Great. So Xue Meng had been lying to him? His brows inched up, a flinty edge appearing in his eyes. He was about to see just how much Xue Meng had hidden from him.

The ensuing conversation was even more confusing than before. The atmosphere grew increasingly combative.

"Can you do laundry?" asked the scroll spirit.

"Soak the clothes in water for a while, then lay them in the sun to dry."

“Yikes! You’re dirtier than a dog!”

Chu Wanning blinked.

“Will you stand to see me off at the door and kneel to welcome me home?”

“You’re not Japanese.”

“Shit, you’re bolder than a dog too!”

Chu Wanning stared.

“Will you be quiet and respectful, and refrain from striking out or talking back?”

“I don’t think you could beat me in a fight.”

“Goddamn, you’re meaner than a dog!”

Chu Wanning was beginning to notice a pattern.

“Will you make an effort to win over my parents and my shizun?”

“I’d be dating you, not your shizun.”

“Fuck, you’re dumber than a dog!” The scroll spirit took Chu Wanning’s resulting silence as an opportunity to ask a question of his own. “Will you be annoyed if I practice martial arts twenty-four hours a day and never have time to talk with you?”

Chu Wanning had had enough of being compared to a dog. His brows drew increasingly tighter in indignance. Xue Ziming… His disciple had never shown signs of lying to him before—he had always been an honest boy, forthcoming about his likes and dislikes. *This* was what he actually thought?!

“There are only twenty-four hours in a day.” Chu Wanning gnashed his teeth. “You’re not going to spend any time in bed asleep?”

But this version of Xue Meng was vicious. “All you think about is going to bed, huh? Could you show a little more initiative? You need to smile more, put a little pep in your step! You should be thinking about how to look after your family. Don’t just dwell on going to bed, getting pregnant, using your kids to increase your status, stuff like that! Read more recipes and fewer trashy novels! Be a good and virtuous wife!”

There was simply too much to object to in this spiel; Chu Wanning didn't know where to begin. He was mad enough to spit blood, yet he couldn't get a single word out. He fixed furious phoenix eyes on the scroll spirit's imitation of Xue Meng's face. At last, lips trembling, he growled, "You…"

"*You* what? Everything I've said is true. My wife has to be honest and pure. I could never be with a girl who spends all her time thinking of such sordid stuff. Ah, I don't think it'll work between us. Just look at you—you're lazy, your temper's terrible, you have no friends, and you're never satisfied." The scroll spirit got to its feet with a look of utter disdain. "Forget it. I heard you were respectable and kind, but it seems like a total lie."

Chu Wanning was so angry he almost passed out. He was shizun to three disciples. Mo Ran and Shi Mei had both made him furious in the past. He'd always thought Xue Meng his most well-behaved student, the only one who never caused him grief. Never had he expected this scroll spirit to so baldly expose the true feelings in Xue Meng's heart.

All his disciples were the same in the end—useless idiots, all three of them!

"I've heard enough," said scroll spirit Xue Meng, turning on his heel. "Goodbye!"

At that moment, the real Xue Meng and Mo Ran were in a neighboring room with several other cultivators, listening for any disturbances. Chen Xuyuan held up an hourglass and babbled excitedly, "Aiya, we're almost there. Chu-zongshi is a real master after all. Just a few more minutes and the spirit will be knocked out. Heh heh—"

The sound of a thunderclap from next door shook the walls. They heard the scroll spirit screeching—

"Ahh! I'm getting beat up! Are you trying to kill me?!"

Followed by an enraged shout from Chu Wanning: "You just noticed?!"

"Wahhhh! Help!"

The listeners blanched, then rushed toward the neighboring room like a swarm of bees. They flung the door open and saw Chu Wanning with Tianwen in hand, the blazing willow vine looped like molten gold around the scroll spirit's neck. The spirit's tongue lolled from its mouth, its eyes rolling back in its skull. Chu Wanning really had almost killed it.

Chen Xuyuan lunged forward. "Aiya, Chu-zongshi! Please calm down! You mustn't! If you kill it, it'll expose everyone's secrets!"

Brows knit in a scowl, Chu Wanning snapped, "So what?! What's there to hide?"

"Shizun!" Xue Meng exclaimed.

Much to Xue Meng's surprise, Chu Wanning didn't soften his tone at all. "Shut your mouth, Xue Ziming! Once I've put this spirit in its place, you're next!"

Xue Meng was flabbergasted. What had happened to his shizun? Not only did he not call him *Sect Leader* for once, he said he was going to put him in his place. Instantly, Xue Meng's mind was awash in both joy and panic. It had been so very long since he'd been on the receiving end of his shizun's temper like this; it was really such a joyful, nostalgic feeling.

As for the panic…

What in the world had the scroll spirit told Chu Wanning to make him threaten Xue Meng like this?!

The scroll spirit was about to breathe its last. Mo Ran hurried over and grabbed Chu Wanning's shoulder. "Wanning, let it go."

Chu Wanning's eyes flashed sharper than a dagger. "I'll kill it first, *then* I'll let it go!"

Mo Ran didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "By then it'll be too late; everyone's secrets will be revealed."

"*I* have no shameful secrets to hide from the world," Chu Wanning shot back. "Do *you*?"

"Of course I don't," Mo Ran said with a smile. "But not all secrets are secrets because someone's done something wrong—sometimes people just have things they want to keep private," he said, trying to talk Chu Wanning off the ledge.

“Like what?” Chu Wanning frowned.

“Uh… For example…” Mo Ran leaned down and whispered in Chu Wanning’s ear. Xue Meng watched Mo Ran’s long lashes lower, covering the amusement and deep fondness in his eyes.

The moment Mo Ran’s lips stopped moving, Chu Wanning released the scroll spirit and recalled Tianwen. “You are so—”

Mo Ran grinned almost bashfully, gaze still downcast. His dimpled cheeks brought a touch of youthful innocence to his manly good looks. Chu Wanning looked as though he might strike him, but Mo Ran grabbed his hand. “Sorry,” he said with a laugh. “It’s just that the scroll asked, and I didn’t want to lie.”

He dipped his head and interlaced his fingers with Chu Wanning’s. Breath hot against Chu Wanning’s ear, he whispered in a voice so low only the two of them could hear, “But I definitely don’t want anyone else to know my favorite positions with Wanning in bed.”

On its own, this statement was brimming with amorous passion—but lamentably, Mo Ran had no idea what the scroll spirit had said to Chu Wanning. As soon as Chu Wanning heard the words *in bed*, he bristled like a cat whose tail had been stepped on. He rapped Mo Ran on the head and snapped, “Bed? What bed? Could you show a little more initiative? You need to smile more, put a little pep in your step! You should be thinking about how to look after your family. Don’t just think about this kind of nonsense all day! Read more recipes and fewer trashy novels! Be a good and virtuous wife!”

Everyone from Taobao Estate, along with Mo Ran and Xue Meng, was speechless with shock.

The scroll spirit took advantage of the crowd’s distraction to bounce nimbly to its feet. “Yes yes yes, that’s exactly right!” it crowed. “You’ve learned all my teachings! Congratulations!” It soared out the window as though weightless, shouting wickedly as it flew, “I—Xue Ziming—will be back! Wah ha ha ha ha ha!”

Suddenly Xue Meng understood the murderous mood Jiang Xi had been in yesterday. This spirit was truly despicable!

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Xue Mengmeng's Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 21

CHU WANNING had lost to the scroll spirit in their confrontation, and so the temporary curse that had befallen the others transformed him as well. When the flash of silver light faded, a snow-white cat sat solemnly on the floorboards. Its beautiful eyes, their ends tilted slightly upward, glared irritably at the crowd.

Although they had known in advance this would be the outcome if Chu Wanning was defeated, everyone watching still sank into an anxious silence.

The bee Ma Fangzhi. The bird Jiang Yechen. The white cat Chu Wanning. What was the point of this? To collect a set of seven zongshi and summon Shennong?

The look in Chu Wanning's feline eyes was even more terrifying than Jiang Yechen's. Birds had limited ways to express themselves, while cats were more than capable of making their anger known. Mo Ran, overcome with heartache and fondness, made to lean down and pick him up. The cat flattened his ears and puffed himself up, revealing sharp fangs as he opened his mouth in an enraged yowl.

A female disciple couldn't help but exclaim, "So cute!"

"I feel like Mo-zongshi let him lose on purpose so he'd turn into a cat…"

When he heard this, Chu Wanning's eyes went round as he glared at Mo Ran and growled low in his throat.

Mo Ran hurriedly raised a hand. "I didn't! I would never!"

Chu Wanning narrowed his eyes. He slowly raised a paw, intending to summon Tianwen to interrogate Mo Ran. But after a loud *mrow*, all that came out of his soft, round paw was a gentle beam of golden light. Combined with his little pink nose, it looked like this big white cat was performing a party trick and sulking for show.

Mo Ran felt his heart stutter. He was down on one knee before he knew it, petting this bristling ball of snow-white fur. “Shizun…” he murmured, eyes bright.

This earned him a sharp meow and an even sharper swipe of the claws. As Mo Ran sucked in a breath, Chu Wanning leapt over his extended hand in a fit of pique.

Just like Jiang Yechen, he couldn’t stand such embarrassment. After turning into a bird, Jiang Yechen had flown away at once. Chu Wanning, after becoming a white cat, also planned to flee without delay.

Xue Meng felt deeply guilty, but also worried—Chu Wanning couldn’t fly. Would he be able to run all the way back up Nanping Mountain in this form? He sprinted over to block his way. “Shizun, calm down. I’ll find someone to take you home, so… Ah!”

Like a tiger charging down a mountain, the white cat batted Xue Meng’s hand away. When Xue Meng still moved to pick him up, he unhesitatingly sank his sharp teeth into Xue Meng’s fingertip.

“Shizun!” Xue Meng and Mo Ran cried out in unison.

Now both disciples had been wounded in action. What an equitable teacher they had.

Chu Wanning ran off without looking back. With a swish of his fluffy white tail, the cat vanished around a corner of the pleasure house.

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Xue Meng shook out his bitten hand. Before he could draw breath to speak, Mo Ran was already jumping up to run after the cat.

“Don’t go home alone! What if someone catches you and turns you into stew?”

Xue Meng started after him too. Mei Hänxue held out an arm to stop him. Xue Meng glared. “What are you doing?!”

“Can’t you tell he’s mad at you?” asked Mei Hänxue. “Let Mo-zongshi take care of it. When he’s recovered in five days, it won’t be too late to go to Nanping Mountain and talk to him.”

“The hell are you saying?! Shizun likes me better than anyone—how could he be mad at me?”

Mei Hänxue leveled Xue Meng with an inscrutable look. “Are you sure you told him the truth about what you’re looking for in a girl? You didn’t lie to him because you wanted his approval?”

Xue Meng was instantly overcome with guilt.

Mei Hanxue came over to stand next to his brother. “I told you not to lie,” he said with a grin. “You should’ve told the truth—now you’ve really stepped in it, haven’t you?”

Xue Meng wanted to argue, but he knew too well that he’d erred. His mouth opened and closed, and eventually he stammered, “I-I didn’t do it on purpose. I really think everything about Shizun is great…”

“Understandable. My condolences.” Mei Hanxue cheerfully patted him on the shoulder. “But both Chu-zongshi and Jiang-zunzhu have been defeated. No one can help them now.”

A feeling of impending doom struck Xue Meng. His head jerked up to meet Mei Hanxue’s limpid green eyes. Mei Hanxue’s smile seemed full of hidden implication. “It’s up to you now, Xue-zhangmen.”

Xue Meng gaped at him. “Why does it have to be me? Why can’t it be you?!”

Mei Hanxue rubbed his nose and laughed. “Because the scroll spirit’s tastes were modeled after yours. You’ve already seen me disguised as a woman, and you didn’t seem all that impressed.”

“But I…” Xue Meng trailed off.

“Do you mean to say you thought I was beautiful and were just too shy to say so—that you’ve actually been besotted with me this whole time?”

Xue Meng’s face turned ashen. “Bullshit!”

Mei Hanxue let out a hearty laugh. “If you admit you liked my disguise, I’ll take care of the scroll spirit. If you didn’t like it, then the spirit’s your problem. So what’s it going to be—compliment me, or catch the spirit yourself?”

Xue Meng could hardly imagine a more difficult decision. Going down the path of seducing the scroll spirit wouldn’t be the worst. Jiang Xi, Ma Yun, and Chu Wanning had already done it; it wouldn’t be that embarrassing for Xue Meng to be the fourth.

But if he also lost and turned into the same kind of bird as Jiang Xi, not only would people become suspicious—wouldn’t he practically be asking for Mei Hanxue to grab him and pluck his feathers?

As Xue Meng wavered, Mei Hanxue flashed him a reassuring smile. “Wouldn’t it be easier to compliment me? Just say ‘Mei is fabulous,’ and I’ll help you.”

Xue Meng wavered for a moment, then glared at Mei Hanxue’s cheerful face. Hands balled into fists, he blurted through gritted teeth, “Fabulous? More like floppy! ‘Mei is floppy!’”

Mei Hanxue sighed. “Blatantly false. Slander, I say.”

“What’s there to be afraid of?” Xue Meng continued crossly. “It’s just another spirit to be subdued! I refuse to believe I can’t take it down myself! Let’s go take a look!”

He shoved the twins out of his way and stomped down the stairs.

Not on pain of death would Xue Meng consider putting on a dress for real, so like his shizun, he used the illusory sachet. Clenching his fists and taking a deep breath, he stepped in front of the mirror and opened his eyes.

The sight that greeted him was one he’d glimpsed once before, in the Gourd of Debauchery.

Xue Meng examined his reflection from a variety of angles. The experience was extremely disorienting. The person in the mirror was beautiful, yes, but at the same time, every gesture looked inexplicably dopey.

Of course, Xue Meng told himself, this aura was very regal and commanding on his usual self. But when he looked like this, he'd have to keep his mouth shut and stay as still as possible in front of the scroll spirit, like a wooden doll. Otherwise, if the scroll spirit was really adhering to Xue Meng's tastes, a woman like this wouldn't appear the least bit attractive the moment she moved a muscle.

As he turned to the side to take another look at his ear, another face appeared behind him in the mirror.

Xue Meng whipped around. "What are *you* doing here?"

Mei Hänxue's tall, slender figure was leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed in front of his chest. "I'm here to give you a little advice. If you fail too, the spirit is going to become even more challenging to defeat."

These words were very reasonable. Though Xue Meng wasn't happy to hear them, he couldn't find an excuse to chase Mei Hänxue away. He scowled. "Are you even qualified?"

"Hm?" Mei Hänxue's brows rose.

"I thought you'd never even touched a girl's hand," said Xue Meng.

"…As if you're one to talk."

"My standards are too high!" Xue Meng snapped.

"My patience is too limited," Mei Hänxue replied indifferently. After a pause, he added, "My current record is rejecting seventy-three lady cultivators for Hanxue in one day."

Xue Meng lapsed into silence. *How* many?

"Could you do the same?" asked Mei Hänxue.

Xue Meng pressed his lips together. He suddenly found Mei Hänxue's existence rather tragic. Here was a man in the prime of his life

who spent his days sorting out his twin brother's dirty laundry. It would be a miracle if it didn't mess him up in the head.

Taking Xue Meng's silence as an invitation, Mei Hänxue stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. "Come here."

"Wh-what are you doing?" Xue Meng demanded, hackles raised. He didn't move.

Mei Hänxue strode toward him. He didn't come to a stop until he was so close Xue Meng could reach out and touch him—unnervingly, uncomfortably close. His green eyes like icy pools of jade flicked downward, whereupon his golden lashes fell still.

"I'll teach you how to avoid getting rejected by a man." Mei Hänxue's gaze was sly and sardonic, those cool eyes glinting with contempt.

Xue Meng couldn't stand this look of his. He reached up, intending to smack him, but Mei Hänxue grabbed his hand without even raising his eyes.

Xue Meng's eyes flew wide in fury. "What are you playing at? Get lost!"

"You'll fail for sure like this."

He twisted Xue Meng's arm. Before Xue Meng could react, Mei Hänxue had effortlessly tossed him over his shoulder onto the ground.

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“What the… Shit!”

“Such vulgar language will fail you too.” Mei Hänxue stood over him, looking disdainfully down at the red-faced Xue Meng. “Get up. If you don’t want to get turned into a bird and let Hanxue pluck out all your feathers tomorrow night—”

A pause. Mei Hänxue reached up to loosen his high, meticulously folded collars. Then he continued, voice cool and controlled. “I have one night to teach you a lesson.”

Xue Meng glared at him, the rims of his eyes scarlet with humiliation.

Mei Hänxue ignored Xue Meng’s ire. He held out his hand, long, slender fingers extended. “If you please, Xue-zhangmen.”

The next day, Chen Xuyuan of Taobao Estate once again arranged a date with the scroll spirit. Perhaps the spirit wasn’t the brightest spell in the spellbook; after being fooled once, it seemed all too happy to be fooled again and again, and cheerfully accepted Elder Chen’s invitation.

When he learned of this, Xue Meng scoffed contemptuously. “It may have my tastes, but it’s way dumber than me.”

Mei Hanxue looked him over, all dressed up for his date at a brothel in the eastern part of the city. He laughed and leaned in, intending to offer a few last words of advice.

To his surprise, Xue Meng immediately raised his voice. “Shoo! Just seeing your face makes me mad!” He turned on his heel and strode off, a whole horde of Taobao Estate’s cultivators following in his wake.

Mei Hanxue stared after him blankly. How had he annoyed him this time?

When they reached the brothel, Xue Meng took a seat alone in the room prepared for the mission, waiting for the scroll spirit to arrive. He was deeply displeased.

Last night, he’d endured an entire evening of being nitpicked by Mei Hänxue, who’d criticized his every word and gesture for hours on end.

After half a night of this torment, Mei Hänxue had concluded Xue Meng was a hopeless case, doomed never to master the conversational skills necessary to avoid getting rejected by a man.

As dawn drew near, Mei Hänxue had advised him, “Enough. There’s no need to continue. If things go south, just start complimenting the scroll spirit. You could probably fill up ten minutes with flattery alone.”

Xue Meng had exhausted all his temper. He slumped on the bed, disbelief written on his weary face. “Why didn’t you say so earlier? You had to torture me all night long?”

Mei Hänxue had glanced at the demoralized heap that was Sect Leader Xue and looked away without a word.

Now, in the room at the brothel, the door creaked just as Xue Meng was calling Mei Hänxue a sicko under his breath.

Xue Meng froze. The scroll spirit had come.

Just as expected, a figure simultaneously familiar and strange appeared on the other side of the vermilion lacquered door. In the flickering candlelight, Xue Meng watched a copy of himself walk into the room.

The scroll spirit waved brightly—an obnoxious gesture. “Little miss, pleasure to meet you! This one—Xue Meng, Xue Ziming—offers sincere greetings!”

Xue Meng blinked. The fact that he didn’t kill the spirit on sight was nothing short of a miracle, he thought.

Now he had to make small talk with the thing. Xue Meng had thought he’d prepared himself extremely thoroughly. Before the scroll spirit had arrived, he’d had no doubt his responses would satisfy his other self in every way. But once the actual back-and-forth began, Xue Meng found he had been horribly, horribly wrong.

“Do you know how to do laundry?” asked the scroll spirit.

Xue Meng immediately gave it the answer it wanted to hear. “Yes.”

“But your hands don’t look like those of a girl who scrubs her own clothes.”

Xue Meng didn’t know what to say.

“Do you practice often?” asked the scroll spirit.

“I do…uh, sometimes.” Xue Meng naturally assumed the scroll spirit was talking about martial arts. “It’s not good for a girl to be too violent, of course, but I don’t want to be totally useless either.”

“I was talking about *dance* practice—what were you thinking? As a *girl*? You’re not the least bit demure or refined!” Faced with Xue Meng’s silence, the scroll spirit launched into more questions. “Will you stand up to see me off at the door and kneel to welcome me home?”

Xue Meng stared at his own face across the table. Usually, he wouldn’t think twice about speaking like this. But now that he’d been put in the listener’s shoes, he suddenly found himself reflecting that he really deserved to be punched. Asking someone to stand to see him off and kneel to welcome him home? Did he think himself a god—a Fuxi or Shennong walking among mortals?

But for the sake of placating the scroll spirit, Xue Meng steeled himself. “Sure, why not.”

“What a half-hearted answer—sounds like you’re just saying that. Where’s the passion? Where’s the sincerity?” The scroll spirit paused. “You’re supposed to say, ‘Of course I will!’”

The conversation continued in this vein. Long before the time on the hourglass had run out, the scroll spirit rose to leave.

“Sorry,” it said to Xue Meng. “It’s not me, it’s you.”

Xue Meng was thunderstruck. All his answers had followed his own preferences and Mei Hänxue’s suggestions to a tee. How could the date be over? Panicking, he suddenly remembered the last thing Mei Hänxue had said—*if things go south, just start complimenting the scroll spirit.*

“Wait!” Xue Meng cried.

The scroll spirit turned in surprise. “What is it?”

Xue Meng quickly adjusted his tone, masking his anxiety with a forced laugh. “I just wanted to say… Xue-zhangmen, you’re so handsome and cool and wealthy and powerful—how could you possibly spend your days in solitude, with no one to admire you but yourself? Before you go, why don’t you let me say a few words of appreciation…”

This sounds so unnatural, Xue Meng fretted. Who knew sucking up was a talent all its own?

Much to his surprise, the corner of the scroll spirit's mouth twitched. "No need. I'll admit you're very pretty, but not pretty enough to make me fall in love at first sight. Besides, I can tell when someone's just trying to flatter me. Little miss, honesty is a virtue. I'd never want a social climber like you, who's only trying to get close to me because she wants to become a rich and famous sect leader's wife."

Xue Meng's jaw dropped.

"I hope you'll realize sooner rather than later that you should only give yourself away to someone you truly love. Don't be a greedy, shallow woman. Goodbye!"

What in the world was this? Xue Meng was so choked with anger he couldn't speak. How could someone talk to him like this? *The insolence!*

As befitting a man taught by Chu Wanning and sired by Jiang Yechen, Xue Meng was constitutionally incapable of suppressing his fury. Just like his shizun and his biological father, once his temper flared, his reason fled. With a screech of rage shrill enough to shatter the illusory sachet on his waist, he drew Longcheng and rushed toward the scroll spirit.

The scroll spirit paled and stumbled back. "Ahh! Someone's trying to kill me again!"

"You bet your ass I am! Who said you could be so stuck-up?!"

Ducking Xue Meng's blows, the scroll spirit shouted, "You vixen! Just because I rejected you, you're trying to kill me? You—y-y-you—"

As the blade came swinging down, the lamplight flickered. As the scroll spirit dove out of the way and turned back to scream at Xue Meng, it finally caught sight of Xue Meng's face—his real face. The spirit froze in place.

At the strange look in its eyes, Xue Meng instinctively took a step back and brought the scimitar up before his chest. "What are you doing?" he barked, raising his brows.

The scroll spirit's mouth opened and closed, its eyes round with shock. "Y-you're a *man*?"

“You don’t say!”

As Xue Meng tightened his grip on his hilt, he heard the spirit cry ecstatically, “And such a handsome, powerful, and dashing man to boot!”

Xue Meng froze.

Eyes shining, the scroll spirit threw back its head in rapture. “Ahh! At last! I’ve found true love at last!”

Xue Meng had never imagined, not in a million, billion years, that *this* was how this saga would end.

“So you see, Xue Ziming is so narcissistic that all we needed was for the original Xue Meng to brandish his sword in front of the scroll spirit. One glimpse, and the scroll spirit saw that there was indeed true beauty in the world. None of that laborious cross-dressing was required after all…”

Elder Chen Xuyuan stood in one of Taobao Estate’s pavilions before Xue Meng, red-faced and flustered, and Master Ma, who’d at last recovered his human form.

Now that the whole debacle was over, Master Ma giggled along with everything Xue Meng said—apparently, it didn’t matter that Xue Meng was the one who’d instigated the entire affair.

“These types of stupid and harmful scrolls should be banned from sale forever!” Xue Meng concluded angrily.

“Yes, yes!” Master Ma said with a broad, unflagging smile. “I never want to turn into a bee again. To tell you the truth, I was terrified when I saw Jiang-zhangmen turn into a bird and Chu-zongshi turn into a cat—both of them could’ve eaten me, you know. No more, I’m done.”

Xue Meng rolled his eyes. Reluctantly, he agreed to drop the matter entirely.

As for the subdued scroll spirit, Ma Yun sealed it in a little wooden figurine, small enough to fit in a man’s palm. This he offered to Xue Meng as a token of thanks.

At first, Xue Meng had tried to refuse the gift. The doll kept shouting in its tiny voice, “Xue-zhangmen is so handsome and cool, so amazing and

accomplished!” In the past, such flattery would’ve struck Xue Meng in the dead center of his heart. But after his harrowing experience, these sorts of compliments left him cold.

“Okay, okay, that’s enough,” Xue Meng said with a frown. “I can’t listen to flattery like this all day long. I don’t want it, I won’t take it. This thing is too phony.”

The little doll blurted in a panic, “Xue is beautiful! Xue is beautiful!” Then, in desperation: “Madam Wang is the prettiest! Chu-zongshi is the strongest!” As Xue Meng stared at it, the doll whimpered, “Don’t leave me behind, wahhh, Xue-zhangmen, you’re so gallant and kind…”

A man’s innate nature was a difficult thing to change. Deep down, Xue Meng still enjoyed hearing these words. He grudgingly accepted the little wooden figurine and placed it safely in a box to bring back to Sisheng Peak.

Just before they were due to leave, the Mei twins sought him out. “Xue-zhangmen, I just remembered…” Mei Hanxue began, eyes sparkling. “Were you satisfied with Miss S? If you liked my service, might I ask you to leave a good review—”

“Review, my ass!” Xue Meng cut him off, glaring at both twins. “Don’t think I won’t settle the score with both of you! I’m going to tell Ming Yuelou to put you in your place!”

Mei Hanxue burst out laughing. “Oh no,” he said affectionately. “Whatever will I do?”

Mei Hänxue remained impassive. “Shizun will go into seclusion soon. I’ll be temporarily assuming sect leader duties at Taxue Palace. Xue-zhangmen, you’re welcome to come to Kunlun and tattle whenever you like—we’ll roll out the red carpet for you.”

Xue Meng froze, then thundered, “*Mei Hänxue!* Y-you—have you no shame?! Does nobody at Kunlun Taxue Palace care about justice?!”

The morning light shimmered down like golden threads stretched across a loom. It touched the white walls and dark tiles, Taobao Estate’s barrier emblazoned with a scrolling black cat motif, the figures of the bickering young men, and the exasperated yet amused face of poor Master Ma, who was stuck trying to mediate the dispute.

And so it went, everyone navigating the minor twists and turns of this peaceful existence.

A month later, Master Ma announced the winner of the Matching Scroll's sweepstakes. Under the pressure of Xue Meng's repeated threats, poor Ma Yun had no choice but to covertly grant the gift bundle to top user Wang Xiaoxue. The grand assortment of precious baubles and valuable artifacts was thus hauled off to Sisheng Peak.

As for the five hundred volumes of erotica, Taxian-jun of Nanping Mountain intercepted their delivery and snatched them for himself.

"Shizun said if you give these books to him, he'll forgive you for lying to his face." This was the message Taxian-jun sent to Xue Meng—a transparent lie.

Xue Meng was dealing with sect business in Loyalty Hall when he received the voice-transmitting paper crane from Taxian-jun. He was so mad he crumpled the little bird into a paper ball. "Can you say that with a straight face?! Shizun would never look at these books! Anyway, Shizun already forgave me ages ago! He wrote me a letter almost two weeks back. Mo Ran, you shameless mutt! Trying to drive a wedge between us *again*!"

His anger was still not assuaged. He turned to the little disciple standing below the dais and commanded, "Hey, you! Get a group together and go to Nanping Mountain. Take back those five hundred volumes of erotica! Burn them all!"

"Um…" The disciple looked back at him in terror, but he could hardly voice his thoughts. *Sect Leader, this is Taxian-jun you're talking about! Stealing porn from Taxian-jun is like trying to pull the fangs from a tiger's mouth—it's a suicide mission!*

Xue Meng glared. "What are you spacing out for? We can't let Mo Ran use such degrading material to harm the Yuheng Elder! Hurry!"

The disciple had no choice but to scamper off. He hoped with all his heart that the one he encountered on the mountain would be Mo-zongshi—if he was lucky, perhaps he'd escape with his life.

He pushed open the door. Brilliant sunshine spilled over the new jade board outside Loyalty Hall. Xue Meng had had the words *A loyal heart remains constant* reinscribed, the characters graceful and majestic. The calligraphy was unembellished with gold or silver, but the warm light burnished the sect's motto to a soft and lovely gleam.

Slowly, the bitter partings and bloody wounds of the past were healing. The great battle receded one year, then two… At last, those old friends left behind in this world learned again how to laugh, to bicker, to endure, to adapt, and to silently remember. Just as the young replaced the old, so too did exuberance replace sorrow, light replace darkness, and serenity replace uncertainty.

Behold—no matter how long and dark the night, there would come a time when dawn would break. Joy and merriment would flourish once more in the light of a new day.

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Who Took Xue Mengmeng's Candies?
Server Edition

Cultivation World Central ∨

#general #off-topic

↳ **phoenixcry started a thread: *Who Stole My Sweets?!!***

phoenixcry

@everyone WTF!! anyone get a box of weird-looking sweets? somebody stole mine!!!

not_tanlang

…so? isn't it just sweets?

our_sect_leader_is_rich

pinging the whole server over sweets? how broke are you, OP?

our_estate_leader_is_loaded

idk how you live like that ngl

CongmingForReal

lol OP are you from the lower cultivation realm?

phoenixcry

can you guys let me finish before you reply to the thread?

so, i lost a box of weird-looking sweets. they're dark brown, hard, and a little bitter, with liquor inside. they're foreign, so they're super rare in

the cultivation world. i’m pretty sure no more than ten people have a box of them, actually.

i don’t really like candy so it’s not a big deal if they’re lost, but there could be dangerous side effects if someone eats the whole box.

please share this!! it’s fine if you took it on purpose or by accident, just please don’t eat them and dm me asap. otherwise i can’t be held responsible for what happens.

still_taking_disciples

dark, hard, and filled with liquor… never heard of anything like that tbh. **@not_tanlang** you’re the expert here, what do you think?

honor.to.us.all

What kind of dessert is bitter? OP, are you sure it’s edible?

naobaijinluvr

damn, i went my entire life without eating something like that.

scaredofghosts

…your entire life? …what a weird choice of words, are you a ghost?

JacquesMa

Calm down. **@naobaijinluvr** probably just means their life so far. Isn’t anyone curious about what kind of side effects you get from eating those sweets?

not_tanlang

…I know who OP is. I’ve seen that box.

@phoenixcry How could you lose something so important? When did you lose it? Were there any clues near the spot where you left it?

sishengpeak_disciple

wow, you sound scary

phoenixcry

↳*Replying to* ***@not_tanlang***

you? you never told me this was your alt… i don’t know when they went missing. ten days ago they were safe and sound in the trunk inside my room, but when i needed one yesterday, they were gone. there weren’t any clues around the trunk, and nothing else in my room was moved. i was rushing so i didn’t take a good look. I’ll check when I head back tonight.

our_sect_leader_is_rich

so they’re not ordinary desserts, this sounds serious… @ op i shouldn’t have called you broke orz

99problemsbutmoneyaint1

Yeah. He’s not.

honor.to.us.all

OP, can you share what happens when those sweets are consumed? If they’ve been missing that long, I’m worried whoever took them ate the whole box already…

not_tanlang

@phoenixcry I wasn’t keeping my alt from you on purpose, I just forgot to share. I’m sending people to investigate this as we speak. You need to keep better track of where you put important things from now on.

still_taking_disciples

↳*Replying to* ***@not_tanlang***

hold on, what do you know? who’s OP?

not_tanlang

@still_taking_disciples Check DMs.

sishengpeak_disciple

hey, **@99problemsbutmoneyaint1** seems to know what’s up. how do they know op isn’t broke?

phoenixcry

i wasn’t sure if i could tell people the side effects earlier, so i asked the person who gave me the sweets and got permission. here it is:

they’re transformation sweets. they’re not really candy, they’re more like a drug. you’ll turn into an animal if you eat one. It’s supposed to make it easier to take on certain missions. the problem is, you can’t turn back on your own. you have to eat one of the white hard candies to change back.

but all the white candies are still in my room.

I’m scared someone turned into an animal and can’t change back… ever…

our_estate_leader_is_loaded

Fuck…

CongmingForReal

ngl im too dumb for this fr. sorry op.

JacquesMa

AYYYY! This is so kewl! **@TemewR&D** Check this out, can we get this in stock for Cyber Monday?

TemewR&D

Overtime initiated.

still_taking_disciples

so that’s who op is…sigh. op never pays attention to his stuff.

xxx-THEHOTTEST-xxx

Had some free time and logged in. This is the first thing I see?

@phoenixcry is giving me gray hairs.

BloomingPollia

Kids will be kids. Worrying won’t do you any good.

@xxx-THEHOTTEST-xxx relax.

honor.to.us.all

Given the severity of the consequences, it’d be best to have all the sect leaders inform the cultivators and civilians in their respective jurisdictions. **@Mods**

99problemsbutmoneyaint1

Temew will never figure out the recipe. Might as well give up.

Moderator

Please take action ASAP.

@JiangYechen_Guyueye @XueZiming_SishengPeak @MingYuelou_TaxuePalace @LiXuehe_BitanManor @MasterXuanjing_WubeiTemple @WeiFeiyan_HuohuangPavilion @MaYun_TaobaoEstate @LiuYesu_ShangqingPavilion @HuaRuowei_JiangdongHall

JiangYechen_Guyueye

Received.

XueZiming_SishengPeak

…I've BEEN working on it okay?!! Stop pinging me, I'm crashing out worrying about my own disciples!!

MasterXuanjing_WubeiTemple

Benefactor Xue need not worry. This old monk will share a dollop of wisdom: I stay calm when others are not, if it gets me sick I'll be covered in snot. Was it ever really that big of a deal? If I die it'll be bad for real.

Relax. All will be well.

HuaRuowei_JiangdongHall

h-huh? i have something just like that >.< its a tube of green paste and one lick nearly set my sinuses on fire. it's not candy but it had the same effect… and it was from guyueye… umm… idk if im allowed to say this though >.< sowwy

JiangYechen_Guyueye

You shouldn't be a sect leader if you don't have a working brain.

LiXuehe_BitanManor

…I have something similar too, but I got a box of stinky tofu that smells like feet. It was also from Guyueye. The disciple who sent it told me I could take it or leave it, but sacrifices had to be made for the sake of cultivation… You're telling me there were other flavors available???

JiangYechen_Guyueye

……

LiXuehe_BitanManor

ACK! Sorry Jiang-zhangmen! I didn't see your message until after I replied! I'm so sorry, I didn't know it was a secret. Can I unsend it?

JiangYechen_Guyueye

Do you think this is WeChat?

WeiFeiyan_HuohuangPavilion

Received. Will deal with it ASAP.

MingYuelou_TaxuePalace

Everyone in Taxue Palace is present and accounted for, but we'll be investigating this thoroughly.

LiuYesu_ShangqingPavilion

Got it.

MaYun_TaobaoManor

Hold on, both Manor Leader Li and Pavilion Master Hua got transformation sweets? Did every sect leader get a box? Why didn't I get one?

MingYuelou_TaxuePalace

Um, not everyone. Manor Leader Ma, don’t overthink it ^-^

NPC1

Things are getting serious…

NPC2

Right? I’m a little worried… Let’s all be careful. Don’t eat anything you don’t recognize. I’ll let my parents know.

honor.to.us.all

@phoenixcry Could you tell us what kind of animal you turn into if you eat the sweets? That way, if someone did get turned into an animal, we’ll be able to keep an eye out.

naobaijinluvr

wow, you’re so kind.

scaredofghosts

I can’t get over how freaky it is to say ‘my entire life’, @naobaijinluvr you better tell me if you’re alive or dead! or else i’m gonna have nightmares!

naobaijinluvr

those who have done no wrong have nothing to fear from ghosts. why are you so scared?

phoenixcry

hello everyone, i’m back. **@honor.to.us.all** thanks for the reminder.

those sweets turn you into a peacock, the kind that can spread its tail feathers.

not_tanlang

Those are male peacocks. You can spread your feathers because you’re a man. A woman would turn into peahen. They wouldn’t have a tail to fan out.

NPC1

Ohhh thank goodness! I’m so glad! Peacocks aren’t likely to get hurt. Imagine if you turned into a pig or a chicken or something, you wouldn’t even be able to stop someone if they tried to eat you.

sishengpeak_disciple

Haha, now I’m curious what turning into a peacock feels like.

2dog2handle

QAQ my shizun’s gone missing…he’s been missin d.g for the past few days…i just saw this thr ead and n, ,ow i’m panic ,k..ing…

sishengpeak_disciple

FUCK!!!

NPC1

oh my god, what if he turned into a peacock and flew away?

our_estate_leader_is_loaded

was your shifu the one who ate the sweets…?

2dog2handle

IDK!!! i searched the whole mountain and didn't see one sign of him! there was no note on the table and his closet's untouched, he definitely didn't go on a long trip! aahhh! what do i do??!!! and he has the biggest sweet tooth!! but it's not like him to eat someone else's candy without saying anything. omgggg i'm so worried i'm going to explode!!

honor.to.us.all

@2dog2handle Calm down, I'm sure it's not as bad as you're thinking. Is your shizun's place close to OP's? If not, I don't think he could've gotten those sweets.

2dog2handle

QAQ ur right **@phoenixcry** where do u live?

naobaijinluvr

@CultivationWorld_AnimalResearchCenter please take note of the peacock population. if any start exhibiting human-like behavior, there's a high likelihood they're a person who turned into a peacock.

99problemsbutmoneyaint1

That's not necessary. AFAIK, the effect of the drug depends on the person. OP transforms into a peacock, but others might not.

JacquesMa

↳*Replying to @**99problemsbutmoneyaint1***

What do you mean…

phoenixcry

↳*Replying to* ***@99problemsbutmoneyaint1***

hey. what do you mean, as far as you know? are you an expert or something? why do you sound like you know more about what's going on than i do?

@2dog2handle i live in sichuan.

99problemsbutmoneyaint1

I mean it's possible to turn into all sorts of animals, from dogs and goats to cats and monkeys. What you turn into differs from person to person. Also, **@phoenixcr**y, I do indeed know more about these sweets than you do.

phoenixcry

heh. you sound pretty confident. do you even know who i am?

Cultivation World Central Server Moderator #3

Okay jk, friendly reminder that no arguments are allowed in this server. Any personal attacks will lead to a three-day ban.

99problemsbutmoneyaint1

I know more than who you are—I know who your daddy is.

2dog2handle

AAAAHHHH WHAT DO I DO?!?! stop playing word games!!!!! OP lives in sichuan! shizun and i don't live in sichuan anymore, but we know lots of people there. if someone sent it here as a gift and shizun ate it, what am I going to doooo QAQ **@99problemsbutmoneyaint1** plzzz do you really have insider info? do u know what determines the animal u turn into

if you eat it? QAQ i gotta start looking asap, a life is at stake!! pls!!! pls help!!!!!! plsplsplspls this is an emergency TAT

underworld_tanghulu

what a filial disciple. i'm touched.

veggiebun

NYAAA~

phoenixcry

@99problemsbutmoneyaint1 …wait, it's you?

99problemsbutmoneyaint1

Yes. It's me.

phoenixcry

BITCH WTF IS THE POINT OF HAVING AN ALT IN HERE?

2dog2handle

hey?! what about me?! cant any of you pay attention?! **@99problemsbutmoneyaint1** hello? can u and OP air ur dirty laundry some other time? i'm losing it over here, wat do i do about my shizun QAQ

99problemsbutmoneyaint1

Watch your language, brat.

2dog2handle

IM SORRY QAQ

Sir, could you please take the time to read my message? My shizun is in danger. I'd be ever so grateful if you could please kindly give me an idea of where to go. Thank you very much!

CongmingForReal

pftttt ik this is no laughing matter but thats lowkey frying me

sishengpeak_disciple

lmfao real

honor.to.us.all

It's really no laughing matter. **@2dog2handle** I understand how you must be feeling, but unfortunately I don't know a thing about medicine and can't help you. I'm so sorry.

naobaijinluvr

you've already done everything you could. don't blame yourself.

honor.to.us.all

↳*Replying to* ***@naobijinluvr***

I've seen you around a few times. Who are you…?

naobaijinluvr

you don't need to know who i am. just know i'm watching over you.

HuaRuowei_JiangdongHall

uwu…is someone confessing?

NPC1

we’re watching in real time~~

2dog2handle

can we confess later?!! QAQ im gonig to die! somebody reply to me QAQ if this goes on any longer im going to go crazy, and i don’t even know myself when im crazy…

honor.to.us.all

Pardon me **@naobaijinluvr** but there’s already someone I’ve liked for a long time. My apologies.

Can we focus on **@2dog2handle**? I think his problem is the most important one right now.

NPC1

yess listen to miss honor

NPC2

btw, the rich guy **@99problemsbutmoneyaint1** wasn’t telling 2dog to watch his language, he was talking to op aka the little phoenix

yuliangvillage_princess

wait i backread and you’re right, 2dog only said he was anxious, he didn’t swear… but op sure did call **@99problemsbutmoneyaint1** a bitch…

NPC1

loool we figured it out. 2dog is so dumb, aw, they apologized for nothing.

naobaijinluvr

↳Replying to **@honor.to.us.all**

i know there’s someone you like. he likes you back.

i’ve used up all my data for this month. going offline now, but i’ll come see you soon.

i wish you all the best.

yuliangvillage_princess

…idk why but i feel bad for **@naobaijinluvr**

JacquesMa

R U unable to pay your phone bill? I can transfer you some right now on alleypay. Don’t worry about it, I like helping out the youth.

naobaijinluvr

it’s not about paying the bill. our vpn is rate-limited.

yuliangvillage_princess

??? vpn… naobaijin-gege, are you foreign? paging

@MeiHanxueOfficial

mei hanxue-gege, can you help him out?

2dog2handle

can u guys stop with the irrelevant stuff QAQ pls reply to me…i think im gonna lose it…

honor.to.us.all

Please, everyone, focus on 2dog and help him if you can. We can chat once the real problems have been dealt with.

NPC1

2dog needs **@99problemsbutmoneyaint1** to help him, that guy's username is so badass i'm sure he's got it in the bag. idk why he's suddenly afk though…

our_sect_leader_is_rich

probs just a sock puppet account that got spooked and went offline

MeiHanxueOfficial

Mei Hanxue-gongzi is busy right now~ I'm his customer service chatbot!

If you're a woman and you're looking to meet Mei-gongzi, please reply 1

If you're trying to get over an ex, please reply 2

If you're looking for relationship advice, please reply 3

If you want to take Kazakh lessons with Mei-gongzi, please reply 4 (girls only)

If you want to beat up the guy who dumped you, please go to **@MeiHänxueOfficial** instead~

MeiHänxueOfficial

Delete your account.

underworld_tanghulu

…this old man knows why our poor dear naobaijin needs a VPN now. He's not foreign.

@naobaijinluvr Check your dms, I’m busy selling tanghulu and I don’t have time to go online. I have plenty of data left this month, you can use it.

naobaijinluvr

…! thank you, li-daozhang! and…about what my father did… i’m really sorry.

underworld_tanghulu

dwbi ^_^b

What’s done is done, it’s all in the past now.

Have fun, my dear boy. This old man’s going to man the shop now.

im_using_texttospeech

Saw this thread by accident. I helped develop that drug so I know a little about it. **@2dog2handle** Don’t worry. Let me find the files and DM you.

99problemsbutmoneyaint1

I see your username, **@our_sect_leader_is_rich.** You’d best watch your language as well. This is no sock puppet, and no one got spooked.

@2dog2handle I went to take my meds. Those sweets take the person’s personality, appearance, and preferences into account when they take effect. Think about it - if you heard your shizun turned into an animal, what would your first guess be?

If you know him well enough, whatever you’re thinking is probably on the mark.

our_sect_leader_is_rich

Huh, you actually know what you're talking about? Better not be making shit up.

99problemsbutmoneyaint1

……

i<3yifu

↳Replying to **@our_sect_leader_is_rich**

^-^ Hello! Please go to Guyueye's Punishment Pavilion. The sect leader is waiting for you.

our_sect_leader_is_rich

ohhhh ok tysm

i<3yifu

No worries ^-^

giftofprophecy

…idk why but it feels like they're not coming back.

yuliangvillage_princess

lol probably because guyueye's sect leader is super scary? speaking of, we haven't seen 2dog in a while **@2dog2handle** what kind of animal do you think your shizun is? tell us, we'll help you keep an eye out.

2dog2handle

dont @ this venerable one. u Rly think ur a princess? tho u seem nice and hv gud taste so ill forgive U. THis Once.

anw, whatev animal this venerable one’s shizun turns into. is nobody’s business but this venerable one’s. gtfo.

NPC1

huh?

NPC2

what’s going on?

JacquesMa

Why did 2dog’s whole vibe just change? Hacked?

2dog2handle

you FOOLS, this account belonged to this venerable one in the first place!

phoenixcry

wait this tone…this spelling…this username…

this can’t be who i think it is…right?

2dog2handle

so what if it is?

yuliangvillage_princess

@2dog2handle hey! don’t be rude, we’re trying to help you! seriously, it costs nothing to be kind.

still_taking_disciples

tbh it feels like op’s found a lot of their irls in this thread… hh, what a small world

phoenixcry

↳*Replying to* ***@still_taking_disciples***

don’t laugh, i know who 2dog is. things just got trickier.

XueZiming_SishengPeak

URGENT! All cultivators please take note! For reasons I can’t disclose here, Sisheng Peak is looking for white cats. Would all cultivators please bring stray white cats to the sect! The reward is five thousand gold each, cash on hand!

NPC1

i,its a truth universally acknowledged that a sect in possession of a leader must be in want of a white cat?

HuaRuowei_JiangdongHall

Wah! That’s so cute! I ship Xue Meng x White Cat and I’ll say it here on main!

2dog2handle

fascinating. so jiangdong hall wants 2 b wiped out?

XueZiming_SishengPeak

Yo Jiangdong Hall girl, keep your fucking mouth shut! Are you out of your goddamn mind?!

XuanjiElder_SishengPeak

Why are we collecting white cats? We already have an orange cat, we can’t afford to feed any more.

XueZiming_SishengPeak

Elder, please check DMs.

XuanjiElder_SishengPeak

There’s nothing here?

TanlangElder_SishengPeak

I sent it to your side account.

HuaRuowei_JiangdongHall

Whaaat? I’m just shipping them uwu~ 2dog why are u acting like I’m trying to steal your man? So mean! Hmph! I hate u!!

gallantryplumblossom

Miss Hua, I can’t help but also request that you please stop talking.

NPC2

haha, honestly i’m more curious why the reward is five thousand gold. white cats are so common, won’t sisheng peak go broke?

VeggieBun

mewmewmew QAQ

yuliangvillage_princess

look, veggiebun’s crying… the orange cat’s not good enough for

you anymore, huh? all you want is a white cat now, huh?

he’s not Sisheng Peak’s universally adored darling anymore,

is he?

phoenixcry

we’re not gonna go broke, we have sponsors.

@JiangYechen_Guyueye cough up.

JiangYechen_Guyueye

……

JacquesMa

Wait?? What’s happening now?? Why would Jiang-zhangmen sponsor Sisheng Peak for something so stupid? Is there some new business opportunity I don’t know about? Are you using white cats in a new kind of pill?

2dog2handle

NO using white cats in medicine! does taobao estate want 2 get wiped out?!

our_estate_leader_is_loaded

…2dog’s whole vibe way different now…like whole other personality…threatening to stamp out a whole sect just like that? its like they have a whole lotta experience…

JiangYechen_Guyueye

You can send me the bill.

CongmingForReal

WTF??! Seriously!!?

iwantasugardaddytoo

is guyueye full of rich idiots? why would they invest in a project that’s obviously going to lose money? wdym sponsor? that’s just a sugar daddy that gives you money for doing nothing at all!

EndLifeCrisis_SeniorsRacecarClub

Jiang-zhangmen! We’re targeting the elderly demographic here. Though we don’t have much of a future, we’d be happy to provide you with some more information. It’s a great charity opportunity…

RufengSect_BurialfrontProperties

Jiang-zhangmen! We’ve got a new build here that doesn’t have much growth potential but you could take a look and consider investing…

MartialMike_XXXFilmStudio

Jiang-zhangmen! We’ve got a project here that’s DEFINITELY going to make you the big bucks, it just happens to be illegal… Let us know if you’d consider taking part in one of our films…

HuaRuowei_JiangdongHall

WAH ! I don’t ship XM x White Cat anymore! I ship Xue Meng x Jiang Xi!

yuliangvillage_princess

why not jiang xi x Xue Meng?

JiangYechen_Guyueye

@Mods Ban all of those accounts up to the latest reply. Indefinitely.

Moderator

Jiang-zhangmen, we can’t in good conscience ban users who haven’t broken any rules. We hope you understand.

JiangYechen_Guyueye

Delete the posts. 100k each.

Moderator

Jiang-zhangmen, we can’t in good conscience take money from users. **@HuaRuowei_JiangdongHall** is a VIP sect leader account. We can’t suspend a sect leader’s account, either.

i<3yifu

Hi **@Mods**, My yifu is getting on in years and not that good at expressing himself, so he didn’t make himself clear. He means that if you suspend those accounts, we’ll pay 100K gold for every message sent in the thread until **@phoenixcry**’s problem is solved. For example, if there are 200 messages sent in the thread before the sweets are found, Guyueye will pay the server 200 x 100K for a total of 20,000K gold. If it takes until the 2000th message, we’ll pay 2000 x 100K for a total of 200,000K gold.

But I have to say, **@JiangYechen_Guyueye** Yifu, this is a huge waste of money. Nobody’s perfect. You have to give people the chance to improve. Won’t you reconsider?

JiangYechen_Guyueye

Mn, it does bear thinking about. **@Mods**, suspend **@i<3yifu** as well.

Moderator

[System Notification] Due to repeated rule violations, users **@HuaRuowei_JiangdongHall, @EndLifeCrisis_SeniorsRacecarClub, @RufengSect_BurialfrontProperties, @MartialMike_XXXFilmStudio,** and **@i<3yifu** are suspended indefinitely. You are only permitted to view the server, not to send messages.

NPC1

…….

our_estate_leader_is_loaded

…….

naobaijinluvr

haha, so this is what “put your money where your mouth is” means.

JiangYechen_Guyueye

Unsuspend **@i<3yifu**. Scolding is enough for kids, there’s no need for actual punishment.

Moderator

Right away.

YuliangVillageAuntieBakery

…The nepo baby privileges are crazy. The other accounts got suspended, even the girls, but **@i<3yifu** was barely locked for a full minute.

i<3yifu

Thank you, yifu. I still have to remind you, even though I know it'll make you mad—if you go on like this, Guyueye's books are going to end up in the red someday.

JiangYechen_Guyueye

…Suspend him again.

Moderator

Okay, right away.

our_estate_leader_is_loaded

Lol their username can't be **@i<3yifu**, that's not accurate. They should use **@ih8yifu** instead.

CongmingForReal

Mods should change their username too then - try **@RightAway**.

iwantasugardaddytoo

Ah! I want live a life of luxury too! Jiang-zhangmen, be my sugar daddy!!

iwantasugardaddytoo1

Daddy!! Are you accepting more sons?

iwantasugardaddytoo2

Papa Jiang! Please take me!!

iwantasugardaddytoo3

Dad! Look here! I'll be a good boy! You're so right in everything you do! Go spend whatever you want! I swear I won't be anything like

@i<3yifu! Dad! Please! I'm your long-lost son!!

daddyjiangxi

some people really have no principles! aren't you embarrassed?! you're saying anyone can be your dad as long as they're rich? how ridiculous! look here, i'm nothing like you all!

jiangxidaddy

LOOL you're so funny! let me make an alt too~

phoenixcry

wtf is wrong with you all?

NPC1

…aiya, there's OP…he was gone so long I almost forgot what this thread was for. i was convinced it was a jiang xi fanclub server…

honor.to.us.all

I'm sorry, this makes no sense. This server is for all the great sects to communicate, but the mods just suspended one of the sect leaders' accounts indefinitely? Is everyone who annoys Jiang Xi going to end up suspended? Didn't you mention good conscience earlier?

Where's your conscience now? Is conscience trash to you?

The reason given for the suspensions was "rule-breaking," but what rules did they break? I modded the server before, I know them as well as you do. Please give us a satisfactory explanation.

Moderator

PSA: A new rule was added ten minutes ago. #131: Please respect the server’s biggest investor.

honor.to.us.all

How interesting. **@JiangYechen_Guyueye** are you trying to set up an echo chamber like Nangong Liu did? You’re well aware of what happened to Rufeng Sect.

naobaijinluvr

sigh…why are you always the first to step onto the battlefield…

honor.to.us.all

Jiang Xi, we’d like to hear your response.

iwantasugardaddytoo

Aiya, what’s wrong with that honor person? He’s rich, he’s the biggest investor, there’s nothing wrong with showing a little respect.

jiangxidaddy

And the mods didn’t *just* suspend them, the mods were first paid off and then suspended them. If that’s how Daddy wants to spend his money, how is it your business?

XueZiming_SishengPeak

…I have no idea what’s happening anymore.

XuanjiElder_SishengPeak

That’s not rare for you.

Also, loads of people are here with cats. Sect Leader, go and see. Make sure you register them before paying up.

JiangYechen_Guyueye

There’s no need to discuss this any further. I haven’t done anything illegal.

honor.to.us.all

Rufeng Sect used their position to bully the weak, and now Guyueye’s leveraging their wealth to do the same thing. Jiang-zhangmen, I’m not saying you’re a bad person, but if you go on like this, it’ll hurt you too eventually.

Moderator

Jiang-zhangmen, do you want **@honor.to.us.all** suspended as well?

JiangYechen_Guyueye

@honor.to.us.all I won’t be scolded by the likes of you.

@Moderator There’s no need for that

@XueZiming_SishengPeak Money sent.

sishengpeak_disciple

FML!! who tf bleached their orange cat to get the prize money?!!

sishengpeak_girly

…you can’t tell an orange cat from a white one? how good was that dye job?

sishengpeak_disciple

QAQ what about basic trust? i set up a bucket at the door—all cats need a bath before entry!!

cultivatorholmes

Hm… Just saw this thread. After reading it, I have a question… Did any of you notice…?

yuliangvillage_princess

huh? what?

madamjiangcantgetmehere

HAHA! I noticed too, but I didn't say anything! Sherlock, are you talking about the fact that Jiang Xi suspended all the accounts except **@yuliangvillage_princess**? Madam Jiang probably thinks saying he'd be the top is a compliment, right~

goodidea_heresmyalt

…m-madam jiang? pffthahahahahah

Moderator

[System Notification] Users **@madamjiangcantgetmehere** and **@goodidea_heresmyalt** have had their accounts deleted. Keyword "**madamjiang**" is now banned in the server. No usernames containing it can be registered, and all messages using it will be hidden.

To prevent the abuse of side accounts for personal attacks, ID verification will be necessary for use of this server going forward.

NPC1

…mods, do you have to roll over for him like that? jiang xi hasn't even said anything yet…

cultivatorholmes

No no. I did notice **@yuliangvillage_princess** was spared, but that's not what I was talking about. Why is Sisheng Peak suddenly looking for white cats? You guys weren't really reading were you? You were just skimming this thread for fun. Otherwise, it should be obvious.

Hold on a minute, let me organize my findings and drop them here.

HuaRuowei_JiangdongHall

Hehhehehe~ I'm ready for the tea~~

JiangYechen_Guyueye

…Mods, wasn't **@HuaRuowei_JiangdongHall** suspended? Did I go blind or did the server glitch out?

Moderator

!!!! My bad!! I suspended her right away!! Maybe I messed it up, let me redo it! I'm so so sorry!!!

HuaRuowei_JiangdongHall

Heh heh~ Didn't see that coming, didja? I'm back again~

JiangYechen_Guyueye

Suspend her now. She's an eyesore.

gallantryplumblossom

Ah, no matter how many years go by, some men will never learn how to handle a woman. Listen, you can't rely on logic when talking to girls like

her - just go with the flow. If she pulls away, don’t chase her. I’m sure she’ll get the hint. There’s no need to throw a temper tantrum.

Moderator

Jiang-zhangmen, there’s a problem…except for the one who was asking you to participate in an x-rated film, all those earlier accounts have been unsuspended, and it’s impossible to suspend them again.

I’m so sorry, I’m contacting IT to deal with it ASAP.

JiangYechen_Guyueye

Don’t bother. I know who’s behind it. **@i<3yifu** was it you?

i<3yifu

Yes.

JiangYechen_Guyueye

So very independent now, aren’t we. My word means nothing to you.

Very well, I’m impressed.

NPC1

HuaRuowei_JiangdongHall

Tyy **@i<3yifu dear**~~ My server white knight in shining armor~

Mua~

i<3yifu

Your word means everything to me. You're wonderful; you're the kindest, sweetest, and gentlest person in the whole cultivation world, but when you make mistakes, I can't stand idly by.

Yifu, I know you know how to do the right thing. You wouldn't have spared **@honor.to.us.all** otherwise.

NPC2

OMG, what did i just read??? **@i<3yifu** said Jiang Xi is the kindest, sweetest, and gentlest person in the whole cultivation world? am i blind or did the server glitch or did **@i<3yifu** go insane?

CongMingForReal

…**@HanlinTheSage_EmergencyEyeCare** Doctor, there's a patient in need of help over here.

2dog2handle

LMAO **@i<3yifu**'s rose-colored glasses are thicc af. the kindest sweetest and gentlest person in the whole cultivation world belongs to this venerable one, obvs!

NPC1

u can smell the chuuni wafting off 2dog's messages

sishengpeak_disciple

imo…jiang xi…and the word "sweet"…can't coexist.

our_estate_leader_is_loaded

this ☝ To add to that, i think it's not just the word sweet, but also "kind" "gentle" "saintly" "righteous" "tender" "passionate" "thoughtful" "loving" "intimate" "sad" "compassionate" "caring" …among others. jiang

xi and those sorts of meaningful words are like competing viruses - they'd attack each other until your computer breaks down.

i<3yifu

You don't know him. Please don't speak of him like that.

not_tanlang

Forget tagging eye doctors, you should be tagging the psychiatric dept. But honestly there's no coming back for this one. DNR.

HanlinTheSage_EmergencyEyeCare

For glaucoma, please DM 1

For cataracts, please DM 2

For severe astigmatism, please DM 3

For presbyopia, please DM 4

If you've gone blind, please dial Hanlin the Sage's global hotline at 3838748

For permanent rose-colored glasses, please call the psych department instead.

not_tanlang

Haha, isn't that what I said?

HuaRuowei_JiangdongHall

@i<3yifu Heyy Xiao-gege is Jiang Xi making you say all this? I feel so bad for you… To thank you for unsuspending my account, this sect leader is willing to bring you here to jiangdong hall~ You can be one of my deputies, and if I see you irl and think you're hot enough, who knows, maybe you can be my sect leader husband~ I'll give you this chance~ uwu~

NPC1

wow this is a whole speed dating event

i<3yifu

Thank you for your consideration. I'm not under duress, nor do I want to go to Jiangdong Hall. I only unsuspended you because you're a sect leader. Please stop tagging me. We're not that close.

cultivatorholmes

IM BAACK FRENS~~ i just got home sorry it was hard to type earlier~

Please look at the following quotes from earlier.

phoenixcry

↳*Replying to* ***@still_taking_disciples***

don't laugh, i know who 2dog is. things just got trickier.

XueZiming_SishengPeak

URGENT! All cultivators please take note! For reasons I can't disclose here, Sisheng Peak is looking for white cats. Would all cultivators please bring stray white cats to the sect! The reward is five thousand gold each, cash on hand!

These messages were sent within one minute of each other. Remember that OP phoenixcry found his candies missing, and these candies turn you into an animal when you eat them. Then 2dog came to report that his shizun had gone missing - phoenixcry didn't care too much at the time, and nobody else really reacted. But after that, phoenixcry said "things got trickier."

Let’s review. Things got tricker when he figured out who 2dog was, which is to say, once he figured out who 2dog was, he realized who 2dog’s shizun is - this proves 2dog’s shizun and phoenixcry are close irl, or why would phoenixcry be so worried about 2dog’s shizun?

Now let’s see. phoenixcry got anxious, and less than a minute later, XueZiming_SishengPeak came online and started offering big cash rewards for white cats. Isn’t that too much of a coincidence?! Who’d believe it??

So lets make a daring guess that phoenixcry is XueZiming_SishengPeak’s alt. Xue Ziming doesn’t really care about anyone. I can only think of one person he’d get this distressed over AND who is likely to turn into a cat.

Is everyone else is thinking of the same person?

NPC1

wow…that’s so impressive…i’ve just been skimming the whole time,

i didn’t put the pieces together at all…

NPC2

i see it now! i thought of the beidou immortal chu-zongshi right away too!

daddyjiangxi

+1 chu wanning

CongMingForReal

i also think it’s gotta be chu wanning. It’s clear as day.

yuliangvillage_princess

but…but chu-zongshi doesn’t seem like the type to eat other people’s sweets?

CongMingForReal

he might not have done it on purpose. maybe it was sent to the wrong address or something.

our_manor_leader_is_rich

omfg! so if we believe what holmes says and phoenixcry is xue ziming, the missing person is chu wanning, and 2dog is…ta…ta…

HuaRuowei_JiangdongHall

…I'm scared I'm logging off now

daddyjiangxi

me too i just remembered i havent paid off my data bill this month

jiangxidaddy

my computer's running out of battery, byebye everyone

2dog2handle

NOW ur scared of this venerable one? idiots.

@XueZiming_SishengPeak how's the search going?

NPC1

TAT im sorry your majesty please dont get mad your majesty dont slaughter the server…

NPC2

wah! were they actually right? but if phoenixcry is Xue Meng, it feels like digging deeper into their convos would expose a lot of other people's alts

Moderator

PSA: doxxing is prohibited on this server.

XueMeng_SishengPeak

@2dog2handle Nothing. All the cats are just normal cats. But Veggiebun is acting weird, maybe because there's so many other cats here and he feels threatened? He's been hissy the whole time. He was just circling me meowing, he wouldn't go no matter what I did. I had him taken somewhere quiet to rest an hour ago, and sent for Huohuang Pavilion's animal experts to come figure out what Veggiebun's trying to say. Waiting rn.

our_manor_leader_is_rich

i'm sorry, who exactly is veggiebun…?

CongMingForReal

madam wang's orange cat who lives at sisheng peak. he's so fat everyone thinks he's pregnant.

BloomingPollia

I wonder if he still likes eating the little silver fish that swim in the back mountain creeks. How nostalgic.

xxx-THEHOTTEST-xxx

Hah, let him and his orange braincell live. Don't overthink it.

Speaking of, our fourth-ranked friend down here is hosting a feast at his place with a lot of delicious food. Let’s log off and go~

BloomingPollia

Mn, sounds good.

XueZiming_SishengPeak

We don’t need any more cats!

@JiangYechen_Guyueye You don’t have to send me silver bills anymore. I’ll send back everything we didn’t give out, I don’t want to owe you.

2dog2handle

what’s going on?!!! why are we stopping just because u said so??!! what about his safety?!!? don’t u care anymore??!

i<3yifu

Yifu said he’s tired of us and logged off already. Don’t worry, Sect Leader Xue, I’ll be sure to let him know.

2dog2handle

xue ziming u better get the hell out here and reply! Explain yourself! Why don’t we need white cats anymore?!!

100ofthesamewhiterobes

…I just went to the Zhongnan Mountains for some mineral ore. What the hell were you imagining? @2dog2handle I’ll be home in an hour.

2dog2handle

!!! YOU’RE BACK!!!??

sishengpeak_disciple

live reporting on the yuheng elder’s alt~

watchingtheshow

…he probably hasn’t seen holmes’ expose doc up there and thinks he’s still anonymous. why’d you have to remind him?

XueZiming_SishengPeak

Didn’t finish my post earlier, I was working with Huohuang Pavilion.

Hi everyone, the emergency has been resolved. No human ate my sweets, they all went into Veggiebun’s stomach… He got curious last night and stole them. When animals eat these sweets, their IQ shoots up. Veggiebun has been trying to tell me he ate them this whole time and got smarter because of it. We didn’t understand what all the meowing was about until the representatives from Huohuang Pavilion translated for us.

Anyway, it was a false alarm, but thank you everyone for your help.

Also, it doesn’t matter if my alt gets exposed - I’ve never done anything shady on my side account, but if this thread gets picked apart, lots of unrelated people might get exposed. To prevent bad faith doxxing, I’ve messaged the mods to delete it in three minutes.

Thank you for understanding.

NPC1

before the three minutes are up, let’s spam the thread to make jiang xi pay more ~ this is one thing i’d be glad to do ~

NPC2

hahaha same~~

CongMingForReal

bffr even if you guys spam 3000 messages in 3 minutes, it’s going to be a rounding error for sect leader jiang. better to save screenshots and analyze them later.

yuliangvillage_princess

um…not to be the bearer of bad news but you can’t screenshot the server anymore. i think the mods were prepared for this.

sishengpeak_disciple

lmao i don’t care!!! before the thread gets deleted, i want to confess to the yuheng elder!!!

sishengpeak_girly

me too!!!! im going to confess to the yuheng elder as well!!!

our_estate_leader_is_loaded

count me in!!!!

JacquesMa

Are you betraying Taobao Estate?? Count me in too! Also **@100ofthesamewhiterobes** are the new blueprints ready? Can I have commercial rights? Why don’t we get rich together?

100ofthesamewhiterobes

…What on earth happened here.

2dog2handle

nothing much, just Xue Meng’s braincells evaporating again. R u home yet?

JacquesMa

heheh, **@100ofthesamewhiterobes** ignored me.

100ofthesamewhiterobes

@2dog2handle Open the door.

JacquesMa

QAQ who wants to get rich with me…I want to make some more dough and set up a Taobao Estate alleypapa venture won’t somebody see my vision QAQ

CongMingForReal

nobody. alleypapa sounds like a flop.

jiangxidaddy

yeah, i’d rather invest in my dad’s jiangnan drug company. paws at u **@JiangYechen_Guyueye** daddy, won’t you look at me?

JiangYechen_Guyueye

Please fuck off.

yuliangvillage_princess

…weird, didn’t sect leader jiang log off to rest? so do you think the person replying is…

Moderator

The thread is scheduled for auto-deletion. Please stop replying. If you must message anyone, please do it in DMs. Thank you for your cooperation.

gallantryplumblossom

Hold on I wanna **@yuliangvillage_princess** Heyyy, you're so pretty. Can I send you a friend request?

Moderator

*AutoMod: **@gallantryplumblossom** has been flagged for rule violation. This account is suspended for one day as a warning.*

Moderator

I told you not to reply anymore—there's three seconds left on the countdown. Three, two…

sishengpeak_disciple

AAAHHH WAIT I WANNA LOOK AT THE YUHENG ELDER ONE LAST TIME

100setsofthesamewhiterobes

no chance in hell. yes, this is some1 using his account. go on and guess who this venerable one is.

sishengpeak_disciple

…is this really a question

MyBrotherNeedsToMakeHisOwnAlt

@Mods Go ahead, I was ready for this. I have a linked family member account. **@yuliangvillage_princess** Miss, it’s me again. I really do want you to be my friend. Message me whenever you want, but please add me on **@gallantryplumblossom** since I’m not usually on this account. I’ll be waiting ^-^

Moderator

One.

→ You no longer have permission to view this thread.

You will be redirected back to **#general** in 10 seconds.

If you are not automatically redirected, please click **here**.

OceanofPDF.com

Happy Birthday, Wanning:
Fight for Favor

Chapter 1

CHU WANNING'S SECOND BIRTHDAY since entering seclusion was fast approaching.

His first birthday—last year—had been an altogether absurd affair. Taxian-jun had happened to be in control of Mo Ran's body that day. When Mo-zongshi regained consciousness, he never retained every detail of what he'd done as Taxian-jun, but he remembered the gist.

Taxian-jun was no sophisticate. He was a frank and straightforward man, wholly ignorant of the finer points of romance, who thought of gold and jewels as a suitable conduit for his feelings. In his boorish mind, the two most expedient methods for expressing his love were first, to sleep with his lover, and second, to spend lavishly on him.

Neither method was inherently problematic. In pampering Chu Wanning in bed, Taxian-jun demonstrated that his heart burned for him and him alone; in spoiling Chu Wanning with gifts, Taxian-jun demonstrated that his wallet opened for him and him alone. Certainly, it was a bit uncouth, but as the emperor couldn't come up with anything more elegant, it would have to do.

It was in execution that he faltered. On Chu Wanning's birthday, Taxian-jun tormented him in bed all night long. The next morning, he proudly hoisted nine enormous baskets of gold ingots to their door. "Chu Wanning!" he crowed, gesturing grandly. "This is all for you—a gift from this venerable one! Do you like what you see? If you're pleased, then—"

The next thing he knew, Taxian-jun and all his gold had been summarily knocked to the ground by Tianwen.

Poor Taxian-jun. What had he done to deserve such a beating? He'd wished to express his sincere feelings from the bottom of his heart and nothing more. What was wrong with sleeping with someone, then giving them money? Was he supposed to give him money *before* getting into bed?

Or—perhaps—*during* the act itself? Was he supposed to keep a running ledger—fifty per grind, eighty per thrust? *Eighty eighty eighty eighty…*

Sitting on a tree stump, he pondered the question in silence. What would his other personality do? After a deal of thought, he concluded his other self wouldn't give Chu Wanning the money directly. Perhaps he'd exchange it for some comfortable robes, or delicious food, or intriguing knick-knacks… Maybe he'd even give the money away to the needy on Chu Wanning's behalf. That would *definitely* earn Chu Wanning's approval.

What a little bitch, Taxian-jun fumed. *That sneaky, despicable, suck-up bastard!* And Chu Wanning thought *he* was the honest one. As if! Mo Ran himself was the only person in the world who knew what kind of scoundrel he really was. That Mo-zongshi appeared gentlemanly and proper, but in truth, he was a cunning schemer. Disgusting!

Anyway, what was wrong with those ingots? There was nothing more straightforward or sincere, more representative of his heart of gold!

Taxian-jun sat with his back to their little cottage, chin in hand and ankle propped on his knee, seething in silence.

Eventually, Chu Wanning resolved to go out and speak to him. But before he'd made it more than a dozen steps, Master Ma of Taobao Estate popped through the barrier surrounding their cottage. With a piteous wail, he dropped to his knees and hugged Chu Wanning's thighs.

"Chu-zongshi, I don't understand!" cried Ma Yun. "Mo-xianjun came down the mountain and cleared out two of Taobao Estate's storehouses of gold. He was yelling something about how a spoiled concubine's smile is worth ten thousand gold…"

Chu Wanning's face instantly went dark. Again.

That night, Chu Wanning refused to let Mo Ran back in the house even after Mo-zongshi's personality had taken over. Only when Mo Ran had written out *I will never again go down the mountain to steal, commit fraud, or even borrow on credit* three thousand times did Chu Wanning relent.

And so, after the painful lesson of the previous year, Mo Ran didn't dare take the occasion lightly. Luckily, after counting out the days, he found

that his saner personality would be in control on Shizun's birthday. Hopefully, this time around, no mishaps would occur.

From the scattered memories he received from Taxian-jun, he gathered that Taxian-jun was preparing some kind of birthday present himself. But seeing as he wouldn't make an appearance the day of, Mo Ran doubted he could stir up too much trouble.

Maybe it was precisely because Taxian-jun's antics had received such a chilly reception last year that he was determined to fight for Chu Wanning's favor this year, terrified Mo-zongshi might one-up him.

Go on and fight, then, Mo-zongshi thought calmly. After all, the hardest enemy to defeat was oneself. He wasn't afraid. Besides, he too was curious to know: Which present, prepared by which version of himself, would make Shizun happier?

"A birthday present?" Xue Meng asked quizzically. He blinked at Mo Ran, who'd slipped discreetly into the sect leader's quarters at Sisheng Peak.

Mo Ran sat before a square table made of exquisite yellow rosewood, its legs connected by elegant stretchers carved with a plum-blossom motif. He toyed with his teacup and laughed. "Yeah. What do you think—what kind of presents do people like most?"

"Who's it for?"

"That's a secret."

Chu Wanning, well known for keeping others at arm's length, had never celebrated his birthday at Sisheng Peak. His disciples hadn't even known when his birthday was. After Chu Wanning and Mo Ran had retreated into seclusion, Mo Ran had embarked on several rounds of pestering before Chu Wanning relented and told him the date. Still, he made Mo Ran swear not to tell a soul, especially not other members of the younger generation like Xue Meng. Thus, the idea that this present was for Chu Wanning never occurred to him.

Xue Meng wracked his brains and couldn't think of anyone for whom Mo Ran would go to such lengths. Finally, it hit him—his own birthday was

coming up soon, wasn't it? Ah, could it be—

He froze, his chest swelling with warmth. Instantly, his gaze softened.

Perplexed, Mo Ran blinked at him.

Xue Meng cleared his throat. In the interest of maintaining the composure befitting a sect leader, he masked his delight with indifference: "When it comes to birthdays, it's the thought that counts. The gift itself isn't important."

"But I still have to give them something," Mo Ran protested. "This person is very special to me. It can't just be any present—it has to be the best."

"Aw, shucks. It's not like I need anything I don't already ha—"

"Huh?" Mo Ran furrowed his brow.

"Ahem! I mean, they might not need anything they don't already have."

"It's not about whether or not they need it—I just want to give them something."

Inwardly, Xue Meng grew more and more pleased. Mo Ran had certainly turned over a new leaf—how considerate of him; what a show of brotherly affection! Xue Meng was so moved he had to make an effort to school his expression. He muttered stiffly, "Well…if that's the case, let me think about it."

"Okay."

"How about Jiangdong Hall's new light armor, with the gold and silver embroidery and kingfisher feathers?"

Mo Ran couldn't imagine Chu Wanning in such a lurid getup, flashy as a peacock's plumage. After deliberating a moment, he answered tactfully, "That would suit you well." *And him not at all*. This, he left unsaid.

"Perfect," Xue Meng chirped. "It's settled then."

"…Let's keep brainstorming." Mo Ran couldn't bring himself to call Xue Meng's taste into question. "Jiangdong Hall's wares are nice enough, but they're not particularly expensive," he pointed out sensibly. "Can you think of anything more valuable?"

Xue Meng's eyes grew round. "H-how could I possibly accept?!"

"Wha?"

"Ahem… I mean, that's fine. Don't spend too much money."

"But a birthday only comes once a year. We shouldn't be stingy."

Xue Meng's heart was full to the point of bursting. He ducked his head, trying to contain his emotions, then clapped Mo Ran heartily on the shoulder. "Say no more, Ge. I'll remember what you said today."

This time, Mo Ran was fully speechless with confusion.

Eventually, he refastened his cloak and left Sisheng Peak. He'd gotten no useful inspiration from Xue Meng—on the contrary, he'd found Xue Meng's behavior baffling and very much out of the ordinary. Clearly, he'd been trying and failing to control his emotions, blurting out his delight and gratitude at the most random moments. Could his duties as sect leader be wearing on him?

Mo Ran wondered if he should write to the Tanlang Elder and ask him to examine Xue Meng right away—at least he might catch the onset of any illness sooner rather than later. What a handful, that Xue Meng…

In the remaining weeks leading up to Chu Wanning's birthday, Mo Ran discreetly visited many of the cultivation world's shops to browse their wares. There were precious baubles aplenty, but nothing seemed good enough—they were all too unsophisticated, too flamboyant, or too unremarkable. None could adequately express the love in his heart.

If only he could take that overflowing love and give it physical form—then, he might offer it to Chu Wanning. But he couldn't think of a single object that could possibly capture his feelings. In his heart was a boundless ocean, far too vast for any mortal vessel. How could any gift possibly contain the entirety of the world he wished to give to Chu Wanning? The enormity of the task troubled him greatly.

After some digging, Mo Ran got his hands on a black-market copy of *Famous Gifts of the Cultivation World*. The gnome who sold him the booklet bragged that it catalogued all gifts of significance exchanged by notable cultivators within the past three decades. Such a claim was patently

absurd, but Mo Ran fell for it. He took the book home and pored over it for a good long while.

Nangong Si gave Ye Wangxi a handkerchief with the character "Si" embroidered in the corner.

Rong Yan gave Nangong Si a quiver that she embroidered by hand.

He hadn't expected to encounter those familiar names in these pages. He heaved a sigh, eyes darkening a fraction.

Ye Wangxi had spent the past few years traveling alone, making her way to distant lands. After seeing the world and saving up some money, she planned to establish a small academy in Linyi, on the former grounds of Rufeng Sect.

It was said that many years before Nangong Changying established Rufeng Sect, there had once been a school in Linyi. Founded by a nobleman who had settled there to get away from the capital, this academy had taught its students the Six Virtues, Six Arts, and Six Teachings that all gentlemen must master. Nangong Changying himself had once been a disciple there.

This academy later fell into decline, but by that time, Nangong Changying had made a name for himself. Based on the teachings drilled into him as a student, he coined his famous motto regarding the seven taboos and founded Rufeng Sect. This was the beginning of Linyi's centuries of glory in the cultivation world.

Now, after all that had befallen them, Rufeng Sect and its splendor were no more. But Ye Wangxi, who still guarded an ember of a Rufeng gentleman's passion in her heart, was determined to continue the line of work that had started with that old academy. Centuries from now, perhaps the cycle would again begin anew.

Mo Ran shook his head, then continued to read—

Nangong Liu gave Qi Liangji seven dudou undergarments of heavenly silk printed with phoenixes and peonies. Embroidered along the edges in evil-repelling gold thread were the phrases "Sect Leader Qi has got it going on," "Rong Yan can't you see, you're just not the girl for me," "Let Liu-ge be the Romeo to your Ji-liet" and other such clever remarks…

Mo Ran looked up, suddenly nauseated. He quickly flipped past the page filled with Rufeng Sect's gifts.

Gifts of Guyueye

The female disciple Zhao Tiantian gave Jiang Yechen a pair of precious jade disk pendants.

The female disciple Zhou Yanyan gave Jiang Yechen a folding fan made of phoenix feathers.

The female disciple Zhang Chunchun gave Jiang Yechen a gold incense burner with handles.

So on and so forth, for forty-something pages. Almost all of them were filled with gifts female disciples had given Jiang Xi before he'd become sect leader. There were even a few from especially bold male disciples. Mo Ran couldn't help but wonder…surely Jiang Xi hadn't actually made his money off his looks?

He scanned down to the bottom.

All the gifts listed above were rejected by Jiang Xi.

Right. Perhaps Mo Ran had misunderstood him. A strange man, that Jiang Yechen.

But even after looking through the book for hours, Mo Ran still found himself wholly uninspired. One additional entry had caught his eye—Mei Hänxue had recently gifted Xue Meng a box of snow lotuses from the Heavenly Mountains, especially nourishing for the mind. Though snow lotuses were precious indeed, Chu Wanning was already so clever that their intended use would be wasted on him. Still, Mo Ran thought, a pond full of them would be a spectacular sight.

Unfortunately, since entering seclusion, Chu Wanning had so far preferred to live a simple life and avoid ostentation. He and Mo Ran spent

their days in their little two-room cottage with its humble courtyard—though if they'd let Taxian-jun have his way, Nanping Mountain would've long been transformed into an extravagant manor.

Mo Ran sighed and closed the book.

The sun slipped below the horizon, soft orange light filtering into the room through the window paper. His shizun had been in a good mood today and had decided to make Sichuan-style wontons. Dinner was nearly ready. A voice, crisp as the clinking of porcelain, called from the kitchen: "Mo Ran, come lend a hand."

"Coming," Mo Ran answered with a grin. The smell of his favorite food filled the air deep within Nanping Mountain's bamboo forest. This aroma wasn't bold or pungent, like a stir-fry or hotpot, but it soothed his heart, smoothing away every turbulent thought.

A little yellow-and-white dog scampered out of the kitchen—a stray Mo Ran and Chu Wanning had taken in last year. As if helping Chu Wanning hurry Mo Ran along, she ran two circles around him, then led the way back to the kitchen, panting excitedly.

"Take the table out to the yard and wipe it off. And bring out a jar of wine," Chu Wanning called from beside the stove. He lifted the wooden lid from a pot. Inside, plump wontons danced in the boiling water, their translucent skins stretched over rich meat filling. Any moment now, they'd be scooped out into a bowl and doused in fragrant red chili oil.

Wreathed in steam, Chu Wanning casually added, "What's that book you had outside? Must've been interesting."

"Just some light reading," Mo Ran replied with a chuckle. He rolled up his sleeves and bent to move the table. The muscles and tendons in his arms rippled as he lifted it.

Chu Wanning frowned. "You should read real books. There's some truly ridiculous material circulating out there. Don't bring that stuff back to Nanping Mountain. Lots of wood-elemental spirits pass through here, and some are quite young. Reading that nonsense won't do them any good. They might be led astray."

"Okay." Mo Ran grinned. He hoisted the table outside, the little dog yipping cheerfully around his feet.

During dinner, Mo Ran bit down on his chopsticks, lost in thought. The little dog sat on the ground near its masters, happily gnawing the meat off an unsalted bone.

Chu Wanning looked at Mo Ran, then at the dog. They were practically indistinguishable, save that the man was biting a piece of wood and the dog a bone. “What are you thinking about?” he asked.

Mo Ran snapped back to reality. “Ah… Shizun. I was thinking…”

“Hm?”

Mo Ran trailed off. He couldn’t ask Chu Wanning what he wanted outright. First of all, his shizun would never answer. Second of all, if he did, the surprise would be ruined. The outcome would be no better than Taxian-jun’s baskets of gold.

Thus he settled on a more circuitous approach. “Is…is there anything we need for the house?” he asked tentatively. “Shizun, what are we still missing?”

“Nothing. We have everything we need,” Chu Wanning replied. “Since we got Goutou, the place feels almost too crowded. We don’t need anything more.”

Goutou[9] was the name they’d given the stray they’d taken in. Once she finished the bone, she scampered over to Chu Wanning and tried to chew on the hem of his robe.

The little dog was mischievous by nature. She’d been hanging onto life by a thread when they found her. After Chu Wanning nursed her back to health, she’d never left. Eventually, she developed a penchant for running up onto the roof to gambol about and tear up the tiles. Chu Wanning would scold her sharply in the moment, but at the end of the day, he doted on her. Even when his hems were gnawed to tatters, he only reprimanded her for being rowdy; he wouldn’t pull the fabric out of her mouth.

Goutou wagged her tail eagerly.

Chu Wanning’s answer had given Mo Ran an idea. “Then should we make the house a bit bigger?”

“So much work. It’ll be too much of a hassle.”

Mo Ran paused. “What if I do it all myself?”

“She makes enough of a racket already. You don’t have to join in.” Chu Wanning lifted his phoenix eyes to gaze at Mo Ran. “Besides, if we have extra money lying around, you might as well go down the mountain and give it away. What’s the point of doing more construction up here? Do you think each of us needs a room of our own—one for you, one for me, one for the dog?”

“Shizun and I can share, and Goutou can sleep by herself.”

“Who knows what trouble she’d get up to then.”

Mo Ran ducked his head and snorted with laughter. “Goutou, aren’t I good to you? Shizun and I are gonna squeeze into one room, but we’ll build you your very own. Where else would you find such a caring owner?”

Goutou turned her yellow-and-white head to look askance at Mo Ran with a very human expression. She seemed to be saying, *Don’t we both know why you want to share a room with Chu Wanning? Have a little shame.*

Thoroughly foiled, Mo Ran dropped the subject.

But Chu Wanning’s birthday was right around the corner. That night, Mo Ran didn’t feel drowsy at all. After Chu Wanning drifted off to sleep, he stared at the ceiling, hands pillowed behind his head. It wasn’t a bad idea to use Shizun’s birthday as an excuse to renovate their humble abode on Nanping Mountain. But to do it properly, they’d need more land and buildings. Ideally, he’d gather a collection of precious things—weapons, artifacts, documents—and build a library and a workshop and a vault…

Ah, forget it—he already knew Shizun would disapprove. Chu Wanning would think it a waste of money, plus a headache to maintain.

As Mo Ran agonized, he caught the rustle of movement outside the house. His ears pricked up. *Goutou?*

He turned to see the little dog curled up in the corner, sound asleep. Mo Ran mentally crossed this possibility off the list.

…A thief?

But they’d put a barrier up around their place. Xue Meng, Ma Yun, and a few others with a special token could come and go as they pleased, but no one else should be able to enter.

Unless the visitor wasn’t a person at all.

He listened carefully as the soft rustling drew closer. It sounded like something was trying to sneak up to their cottage. Mo Ran held his breath. He was just about to sit up and peek out the window when he heard three soft raps on the door.

Mo Ran was flabbergasted. Who in the world would hike up Nanping Mountain and knock on their door at this time of night?

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Happy Birthday, Wanning:
Fight for Favor

Chapter 2

MO RAN SLIPPED out of bed and pushed the door open with a muted creak. The rough-hewn gate of the courtyard was ajar—still swaying slightly. He caught a glimpse of a pudgy white tail held aloft, a pale blue flame gleaming at its tip.

Was he hallucinating? In all the time they'd lived on Nanping Mountain, he'd never seen anything like this. What kind of creature could it be?

Before he could run after it, he spied a lotus leaf laid at the bedroom door. In its center was a wooden box, small enough to fit in his palm. He picked up the leaf—for some reason, it gave off the faint scent of osmanthus—and read the message scrawled across it in bubbly, juvenile handwriting:

A birthday gift for Sacred Tree-xianjun. Good luck, boss. This is all the help I can give you.

—A rice-cake spirit carrying the hopes of his village on his shoulders

Mo Ran's eyes went wide, and he nearly fell over in shock. "Rice-cake spirits are *real*?!"

But—but wasn't that just something he'd made up to prank Xue Meng all those years ago? They actually existed?! He touched a thoughtful finger to his lips. Had he somehow manifested them? Maybe the Demon Lord had neglected to mention some additional power of special Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts? How else to explain this pudgy white creature with a pale blue light shining at the tip of its tail? The spirit had run off quickly, so Mo Ran hadn't gotten a good look at it. But he was absolutely certain that it

perfectly matched the description he'd made up: soft and round, with a lotus leaf on its head.

Mo Ran brought the box back into the bedroom.

Chu Wanning and Goutou slept peacefully, undisturbed by their midnight visitor. Mo Ran crossed to the bed and smoothed the covers over Chu Wanning's curled-up form. He crouched in front of Goutou's bed to give her a couple of pats. Then he went to the table to examine the small offering.

It held no traces of violent or wicked energy. There was a strong fae spiritual aura, but it seemed wholly benevolent.

He turned the box over in his hands. It had no obvious seams or keyholes, and the rice-cake spirit hadn't left any instructions for how to open it. He frowned. What was it for? Could it be decoration? But the wood was weathered and worn, hardly pleasing to the eye.

As if in answer to his questions, two lines of glittering gold calligraphy appeared on the box.

Nice to meet you, Zongshi. I am a fae artifact called Dreams Come True.

Mo Ran startled so forcefully he almost fell out of his chair. This box could read the desires in someone's heart?

No. The words on the box erased themselves, then flashed a new answer, line by line. *I can only read the desires of my master. I cannot learn those of others.*

With effort, Mo Ran pulled himself together. He glanced over his shoulder at Chu Wanning, sleeping with his face buried in the blankets, and Goutou, sleeping with her face buried under a paw. "So does that mean I'm your master?" Mo Ran whispered.

Yes, Master, I have been given to you.

Mo Ran paused, still confused. "But I thought you were that little spirit's gift for Shizun?"

First, you must make some alterations, said the box. *We have sensed your fervent wish to prepare a birthday surprise for Sacred Tree-xianjun. We have also witnessed the many obstacles that have stood in your path. No*

need to worry any longer. Now that I am here, your dreams will surely come true.

Mo Ran took a moment to digest this. Gradually, it dawned on him—his sincerity must've summoned the attention of the spirits on the mountain. They'd come to help him make his dreams into reality!

Yes, exactly. New words scrolled across the box's surface. *Be at ease, Zongshi. This year's birthday celebration will go much better than the last.*

Recalling the nine baskets of gold ingots, Mo Ran was caught between laughter and tears. "Let's not bring up last year," he said at last.

Rid of his misgivings, Mo Ran read the Dreams Come True box's instructions with interest. To prevent Chu Wanning or any others from using it before his birthday, it seemed Mo Ran needed to set a passcode. The box would only come to life with this passcode; otherwise, it would appear entirely ordinary and unremarkable.

"How about 'Shizun'?"

No, this is too simple and likely to be said accidentally. The box hesitated. *We recommend you choose a phrase containing several words.*

"I see…" After a moment's thought, Mo Ran said, "Got it—'gold is an idiot's idea of a gift.'"

Done, said the box. *"Gold is an idiot's idea of a gift" has been set as the passcode for the Dreams Come True box. Mo-zongshi, do you wish to try me?*

Mo Ran eagerly nodded.

There was a blinding flash of light; he closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he'd been transported to an entirely new world.

He stood in a clearing near a pile of timber, beneath a sky of golden clouds and rosy mist. Streams and hidden springs filled this ethereal paradise, surrounded by high mountains. Luxuriant haitang blossoms floated through the air, their petals drifting down the clear and flowing waters of this wondrous realm.

A plump rice-cake spirit sat on a tree stump. It waved its flame-tipped tail to and fro, idly squishing its soft paws together. As Mo Ran watched, it pressed a bit too hard and accidentally glued them together. The little spirit

wrenched its arms apart with all its might, but a string of sticky rice dough stretched between its paws no matter how hard it pulled.

Mo Ran walked over and flicked his fingers in a detachment spell. With a soft *pop*, the spirit's paws were freed.

Round tummy heaving, the rice-cake spirit labored to catch its breath. When it lifted its head, two beady black eyes peered up at Mo Ran from beneath the lotus leaf. "Phew… I've been thaved! Th-thankth a lot!"

"No problem. Are we inside the Dreams Come True box? Are you the…" Mo Ran had been about to say *creature*, but it seemed impolite. "Uh…caretaker?" he asked with a smile. "Of this box?"

"I'm not the caretaker." The rice-cake spirit's voice was soft and doughy, but its tone was unexpectedly belligerent. "I'm the owner of thith plathe, you…th-thilly goothe!"

Mo Ran blinked in shock. "Why are you calling me names?"

"I'm—I'm the motht awethome rithe-cake in my whole village! I'll call you any nameth I want, and y-y-you can't thtop me!"

Mo Ran found himself at a loss. Evidently, this self-proclaimed awesome rice cake had both a cantankerous temper and a speech impediment. A far cry from the cute and shy little rice-cake spirit who'd originally dropped off the box. This one must have been the village tyrant—no wonder its peers had banished it to a beat-up wooden box. *Gao the Glutinous*, Mo Ran mentally dubbed it with amusement—*gao* for "cake" in a niangao rice cake.

The rice-cake tyrant glared up at Mo Ran, hands on what were presumably its hips, as if daring Mo Ran to strike it. The pose was surely meant to be intimidating, but as Mo Ran took in the pudgy white creature with its stubby arms and legs, he couldn't help but burst out laughing. He patted the rice cake on the head. "You're sooo cute!"

Gao the Glutinous straightened the lotus leaf Mo Ran had patted askew. "Don't laugh!" it cried, furious. "Pull yourthelf together! You thmelly pig!"

"What did you say? Sorry—" The rest was lost in a fit of giggles.

“N-no more laughing! I’m warning you! Your fate ith in my handth now!”

After a long and trying exchange, Gao the Glutinous and Mo Ran arrived at a truce: Mo Ran would stop laughing, and in exchange, the rice-cake spirit would explain the workings of the box.

Gao the Glutinous’s village was full of rice-cake spirits, each with their own distinct personality. But it hadn’t been put into this box because of its overbearing manner, it insisted. “It’s becauthe I’m the betht human thpeaker in my whole village—my enunthiation ith very clear and prethithe! That’th why everyone thelected me to be the—th-thpoke—thpokethperthon!”

“…the spokesperson?”

“Yeth! Ekthactly! The thpokethperthon!”

Mo Ran stared at its self-satisfied expression. Barely a moment later, he dissolved into helpless laughter once more.

“*Hey!*” Gao the Glutinous stamped its doughy little feet. “Why are you laughing again?! Don’t laugh at me! I’ve been learning human thpeech for a whole th-thentury! Don’t laugh! If you keep laughing I’ll thlay you!”

Not wishing to be thlain, Mo Ran stifled his laughter, which required no less willpower than resisting Tianwen’s interrogations. “Okay—okay, I’ll stop. Could you please tell me how to use this Dreams Come True box?”

Gao the Glutinous smacked its lips and crossed its arms, fixing its beady-eyed stare on Mo Ran. Only after confirming that he truly wasn’t laughing did the rice-cake spirit begin. “Bathically, the world in thith bockth ithn’t the thame ath the one outthide. Didn’t you thay you wanted to build Thacred Tree-xianjun a bigger houthe and plant thome nithe flowerth in the yard?”

Mo Ran nodded. “That’s right, but my shizun thinks it’s too extravagant, plus the renovation will be noisy. He didn’t like the idea.”

“Th-that’th okay.” Gao the Glutinous waved its little paw. “In thith box, you won’t take up any th-thpathe outthide, and your shizun won’t get dick o—”

“Sorry,” Mo Ran cut in solemnly. “Your pronunciation’s fine in general, but…it’s *sick*, not *dick*.”

Gao the Glutinous blinked in concentration. “*Dick*—”

“Sick.”

“Dick…”

“Don’t press your tongue against the roof of your mouth. *Sick*.”

Gao the Glutinous’s face went pale with effort. It lifted its chin and squeaked out emphatically: “*Thick*—”

Mo Ran massaged his forehead. “Close enough. Continue.”

“What wath I thaying?”

“That whatever I make in the box won’t take up space outside, and it wouldn’t disturb my shizun,” said Mo Ran. “But if I secretly build a new house and yard for Shizun in here, I’ll still have to gather all kinds of expensive things—seeds, plants, ingredients, artifacts.” He let out a humorless laugh. “When Shizun finds out, he’ll say it’s a waste.”

“Don’t worry,” said Gao the Glutinous. “Thingth in here are different from outthide. Whether you want to build a houthe, dig a pond, plant flowerth, or cook delithiouth food…you don’t need money for any of it! Y-you can barter for everything with me!”

“Barter?” Mo Ran’s eyes widened.

“That’th right.” Gao the Glutinous pointed at its belly. For the first time, Mo Ran noticed an inconspicuous little pouch there, made of the same soft, white dough as its body.

“Your human houtheth and plantth are all th-tho ugly! Thacred Tree-xianjun ith tho ethereal, itemth from our fae tribe will thuit him better! You jutht need to bring me thingth from outthide—clotheth, flowerth, figurineth… And I’ll trade you for them!”

“But how do I know I’ll like what you give me in return?”

“Th-that dependth on your luck,” said Gao the Glutinous. “But I’m very g-generouth—I promithe I won’t rip you off. If you don’t believe me, give it a try right now.”

A fine idea—but Mo Ran had entered the box wholly unprepared. He was wearing only a light inner shirt over his trousers and hadn't brought anything else with him. After thinking it over, he shrugged out of the shirt and handed it to the rice cake.

"This is all I have. What will you give me for it?"

Gao the Glutinous took the shirt, examining it carefully. "Thith shirt hath a thtory. It'th been through a lot."

The rice cake looked at Mo Ran's bare torso, its beady gaze raking over him several times. Mo Ran had a fine physique—of that, there was no question. His posture was straight-backed and confident, his abs were toned, and despite the scar over his heart that would never fade, his defined pectorals suggested a latent yet ferocious strength. Every rise and fall of his chest seemed to suggest lava smoldering beneath.

"Nithe body," said Gao the Glutinous. It peered at the clothing in its hands. "For the shirt of the thnack Mo-zongshi…I could give you…" Muttering, it stuffed the shirt into its pouch, then rummaged for a while. "Aha! Yeth! Thith ith it!"

Mo Ran drew over to see a handful of small, pale gold objects clustered in its paw. "What're those?"

"Longevity flowerth of the fae tribe," Gao the Glutinous declared. "I think I can trade your clotheth for more theedth from thothe lithentiouth flower faerieth. Here—thee for yourthelf."

This time, Mo Ran paid no mind to any of Gao the Glutinous's mispronunciations. He peered intently at the seeds, then strode over to an empty patch of ground. Gao the Glutinous waddled after him.

"How do you plant them?"

"Jutht t-toth them onto the ground!"

Mo Ran scattered them over the dirt. These fae flowers, here in their native soil, grew differently from plants of the mortal realm. The instant the seeds touched the ground, a field of gold and silver flowers burst from the earth. The golden blossoms resembled tree peonies, the silver ones lilacs. Their luxuriant petals billowed softly, iridescent against the backdrop of the night sky.

Upon examining the flowers more closely, Mo Ran's astonishment grew. In the center of every peony sat a tiny flower maiden plucking a golden pipa, and among the stamens of each lilac perched a minuscule flower imp holding a silver flute. Both fairies were smaller than his fingernail. Their translucent wings fluttered with the rhythm of their music, making the field of flowers appear even more dreamlike.

"Th-that one shirt is worth all this?" Mo Ran exclaimed.

"That'th right, I thaid I'm generouth, didn't I?" Gao the Glutinous straightened its lotus leaf hat with a smug smile. "I'm the cooletht kid in my whole village!"

Hope flooded Mo Ran's chest like sunshine. "Uh, wait for me—I'll come back here lots over the next few days. Let me think about what I can trade you!"

He turned on his heel, only to realize he didn't know how to get out.

Gao the Glutinous rolled its eyes and pointed a pudgy paw in the direction from which Mo Ran had come. "Go that way. Keep going thtraight and you'll find the ekthit. But—"

Before it could finish, Mo Ran was already running off in delight, too eager to see what else he could sneak into the box. Gao the Glutinous's stammer only got stronger when it was excited. It was stuck on *but* for an age before managing to shout the rest of the sentence: "But but but—! You won't get thuch a good deal every thingle time! Pick your itemth carefully! All the rithe-caketh really like Thacred Tree-xianjun's thingth. Jutht now I wath showing you an ekthample, but I didn't break even on that trade. In the future, you won't be ripping me off—I'm not th-thtupid!"

Gasping for breath, it finished its spiel, then looked up. Mo Ran was nowhere to be seen. Gao the Glutinous blinked after him in a daze, scratching its soft head amidst the flowers. "Wh-why'd he run off tho fatht?! He didn't even thay what he'd bring nektht time! Thilly goothe!"

When Mo Ran opened his eyes, he found himself once again sitting in front of the desk. In his excitement and surprise, he toppled from the chair with a cry.

The noise instantly woke Goutou. She jumped to her feet from where she'd been curled up by the furnace and barked loudly in confusion.

"Shh! Goutou, quiet!" Mo Ran scooted over to grab the dog and patted her head. "Don't bark or you'll wake up Wanning."

Goutou whined—then went right back to barking.

At a loss, Mo Ran was about to clamp Goutou's jaw shut when a rustle sounded behind him. A sulky, sleepy voice cut through the soft darkness. "It's the middle of the night. Why aren't you sleeping?"

Mo Ran whirled to see Chu Wanning raise his head from the pillow, squinting and clearly only half-awake. "Wanning…"

Chu Wanning flipped over onto his stomach, gazing at him sedately behind sleep-tousled locks. Slowly, the haze of slumber lifted. Chu Wanning froze, then his eyes widened. "Mo Ran, where are your clothes?"

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Happy Birthday, Wanning:
Fight for Favor

Chapter 3

"HUH?" Mo Ran jumped and looked down at himself. He touched his naked torso but had no idea what to say. "Uhh…"

Chu Wanning's eyes slowly narrowed at his sheepish gesture. A likely explanation took shape in his mind. "Wasn't I just saying we have to set a good example for Goutou? She's still a puppy; what if she cultivates into a fae?"

"Y-yeah."

"So how will you explain yourself to her?"

Goutou barked into the ensuing silence.

"You… You're right, of course." Privately, Mo Ran was skeptical. Even if they recited sutras at Goutou all day long, he doubted the little butterball would ever manage to cultivate into a spirit. And what did a dog understand anyway? Even if he fucked Chu Wanning in front of Goutou every day, she'd have no idea what it meant.

But of course, his shizun was always right. "Wanning, let me explain," Mo Ran began. "It's not what you're thinking. I didn't take my robe off with any particular intentions…"

Goutou, the perfect agent of chaos, continued barking away in Mo Ran's arms.

Chu Wanning pressed a palm to his forehead in frustration. "Let her go," he said through gritted teeth. "And put a shirt on—shameless!"

The atmosphere had grown awkward. Craning her neck in his arms, the yellow dog gave Mo Ran a particularly withering look.

Mo Ran rubbed his nose. "W-Wanning…" he said hesitantly. "If you told you I traded my shirt for a field of flowers, would you believe me?"

A pregnant pause. Then Chu-zongshi's furious voice cut through the stillness on Nanping Mountain. "Mo Weiyu," he thundered, "do you think your master's gone stupid in seclusion?!"

"N-n-no! Of course not, you haven't g-gone thtupid! No way, Shizun's the thmartest!"

"Speak properly! Where'd the lisp come from—and the stutter?"

Mo Ran hadn't forgiven Goutou. That dog always seemed to be harboring distinctly un-dog-like motives. For example, whenever she gave Mo Ran that sidelong, doleful look, he was sure she was judging him.

Goutou hadn't been like this when they'd first found her in a pile of straw and brought her home. But now, Chu Wanning was enamored with the little dog. Because she was still young—only five months old—he'd forbidden Mo Ran from doing anything particularly degenerate in their bed for the past month.

Upon reflection, Mo Ran sincerely believed his actions as Mo-zongshi were commendable and appropriately self-restrained. He'd even managed to hold himself back a great deal as Taxian-jun. For instance, when he'd indulged himself a bit too much and earned an earful from Chu Wanning, he hadn't kept going, nor had he bundled Goutou off to the kitchen and made her into dog stew. Yet now, in hindsight, he saw his mistake: He should've strangled this stupid dog from the very beginning.

Angry as he was, he couldn't afford to waste any time preparing Chu Wanning's present. The next morning, Mo Ran began brainstorming what objects he could take into the box.

"Fresh fish, millet, sugar…bamboo dragonflies, paper butterflies, silk handkerchiefs…"

While Chu Wanning was foraging for fruit in the forest, Mo Ran seized the opportunity to take inventory of their home. Anything they could spare—from extra grain to tattered old rags—went into his qiankun pouch.

Goutou looked on in horror. Was this her master, or a thief dressed up as him? If she could have spoken, she'd surely have piped up in protest: *Bro, are you serious? That's my bowl you're taking—*

Wait, my bowl! With a yip of belated realization, Goutou launched herself at Mo Ran. She latched onto the rim of her bowl, trying with all her might to wrest it from this shameless bandit. She barked raucously: *Don't take my bowl!*

But Mo Ran was equally stubborn. The bowl was from Taxue Palace, carved from lustrous Kunlun jade, and kept food fresh for up to three days. Before they'd found Goutou, Mo Ran had wanted a cat—in particular, a soft white kitty, quiet and clever. Cats didn't need to eat much. When he and Chu Wanning were traveling, they might not come home for two or three days. He'd asked Mei Hänxue for the bowl to keep the cat's food fresh.

Who would've thought this dumb dog would barge into their lives before he had a chance to find a cat? What good was this food-preserving capability for Goutou? As soon as her food landed in the bowl, it was gone in less than three blinks, to say nothing of three days.

"Let go! *I* bought this bowl in the first place!"

"Bark bark bark!" *But you gave it to me!*

"I was letting you borrow it! Your time's up, I'm taking it back!"

"Bark bark bark!" *Bullshit!*

"Let go!"

"Bark bark!" *No way!*

"I said let go!"

"Bark!" *Fuck off!*

As man and dog squabbled, the door to the yard creaked open. Chu Wanning stood with a basket of fresh fruit, hand still raised to push open the door. Glancing downward, he took in the sight of Mo-zongshi on all fours, wrestling over a dog bowl with Goutou.

Chu Wanning stared in silence, then set the basket down on the stone table in the yard. He picked up an orange, paused, then took a couple more. He turned to Mo Ran. "Don't move—I'll wash these for you."

He strode into the kitchen. Mo Ran heard him sigh and mutter to himself, "Ah… Maybe the congee I made this morning was inedible… Why's he fighting Goutou for her food…"

Mo Ran blanched. “Shizun! Wait! No, it’s not like that—aiyo!”

Seizing Mo Ran’s moment of distraction, Goutou whined and clamped down on his hand. Mo Ran squawked in pain and dropped the bowl. The little yellow dog grabbed her prize and sprinted through the open door, vanishing beyond the courtyard.

The morning passed in chaos. After lunch, Mo Ran told Chu Wanning he was off to check the book stalls in nearby Lin’an. With the Dreams Come True box tucked safely into his robes, he left the house. He found a deserted patch of the mountain and recited, “Gold is an idiot’s idea of a gift.”

Once more, he found himself in the realm within the box.

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Gao the Glutinous was lying in the sunshine next to the field of gold and silver flowers, enjoying the faerie music. When it saw Mo Ran approaching, it stammered, “Y-y-you—you’re back?”

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

The rice-cake spirit airily waved a hand, eyes darting toward Mo Ran’s qiankun pouch. “Wh-what kindth of thingth did you bring?”

Mo Ran pressed all the odds and ends he’d collected over the course of the day into its paws. The rice-cake spirit opened the pouch, rummaged through its contents, then heaved a sigh.

“What’s wrong?” Mo Ran asked, chest tightening.

“Young man, you are tho poor.”

Mo Ran lowered his gaze. “But I don’t know what you’re looking for,” he said somewhat helplessly. “I’ve got more valuable things too, but we use them every day… If you don’t think these are good enough, then—”

“Forget it; I know you guyth are the do-gooder type,” Gao the Glutinous broke in. “L-let’th firtht thee what we have here. I won’t be able to give you the betht with only thith much. But fae artifactth are all f-f-full of wonderth! With jutht a little imagination and hard work, even the dinkietht oneth are quite nithe!”

“Really?” Mo Ran laughed, his mood brightening. “Then I’m very grateful.”

Gao the Glutinous wiggled a paw again, then began sorting through Mo Ran’s offerings one by one.

“For fresh fish—I’ll give you thith!” Gao the Glutinous drew out a soft wad of felted cloth.

“What is it?”

“Th-thith is fabric made from cat fur!”

Mo Ran’s eyes widened as he took the cloth. “You can make fabric out of cat fur?”

“From a nine-tailed faecat,” Gao the Glutinous explained. It drew something else from its pouch. “I’ll give you thith for the bamboo dragonfly!”

Mo Ran peered down at what appeared to be a pile of ordinary wooden sticks. “And these are?”

“Thtick one in the ground and blow on it, and it’ll become quality timber. Not the betht, but pretty good.”

Gao the Glutinous continued his catalog, bestowing on Mo Ran a strange assortment of additional items. Among them were a humongous clamshell bigger than Mo Ran was tall, a bell from which snow would fall when the wind blew, a flock of swallows that excelled at building nests, a stack of bluestone bricks that would arrange themselves into a paved path, a flame that understood spoken commands…so on and so forth.

The most valuable item Mo Ran had smuggled in turned out to be a lump of charcoal Chu Wanning had made while cooking. Gao the Glutinous was so enamored of it that the little spirit refused to let it go, explaining that this was its favorite food in the world. Mo Ran was simultaneously surprised and tickled. *If only Wanning cooked every day,* he thought to himself, *I could bring you more charcoal than you could eat in a lifetime.*

“What will you give me for this charcoal, then?” Mo Ran asked.

“Wait—and thee,” Gao the Glutinous mumbled between crunching down on its mouthful of charcoal. It waved a little paw.

A pool of lotuses appeared next to the field of flowers, its waters gleaming as if scattered with gold. Resplendent snow lotuses bloomed across its entire surface.

“Thith ith the Dreamth Come True pond,” said Gao the Glutinous, smacking its lips as if not quite satiated. “If you want to eat a thertain kind of fish, go to the bank and thay the name twithe, and it’ll appear for you, wrapped in a lotuth leaf. Or you can athk for fresh lotuth root and tender water caltrop too. You’ll be all thet for your birthday dinner. Ithn’t it great?”

Mo Ran gaped at the pond for a moment, then turned back to Gao the Glutinous with newfound resolve. “Next time, I’ll bring you lots more charcoal!”

“R-r-really?!” Gao the Glutinous stammered, clearly moved. “You’re the betht!”

“No, *you’re* the best,” Mo Ran replied with feeling.

Armed with the rice-cake spirit's wares, Mo Ran rolled up his sleeves and got to work. Shizun's birthday was only two days away. Taxian-jun would be in charge tomorrow, so Mo Ran needed to make the most of the time he had. As long as he worked the rest of the day, plus the morning of the day after tomorrow, he'd have a surprise for his shizun after he finished his longevity noodles in the evening.

Mo Ran quickly organized the fabric, timber, and assorted objects from the fae tribe. He'd decided: He was going to make an otherworldly, pastoral wonderland for his shizun. It wouldn't cost any money, nor would it disturb their neighbors. He expertly erected the beams and rafters, feeling quite pleased with himself.

When there's a will, there's a way! Shizun will definitely have a much happier birthday this year!

But poor Mo-zongshi was far too naïve. Perhaps *he* had no desire to feud with himself—but the same could not be said of his alter ego. Taxian-jun wouldn't hesitate to fight his other self to the death. How could he simply step aside and let Mo-zongshi come out on top? In fact, ever since they'd retired to Nanping Mountain, Taxian-jun had been pitting himself against Mo-zongshi in every possible way.

Both Taxian-jun and Mo-zongshi had incomplete memories from the other's time in control. This turned out to be more problematic than if they'd remembered everything or nothing at all. It was like squinting at a room through a gauze curtain, fervently wishing to be allowed in.

For instance: Taxian-jun often stared at Chu Wanning as he made congee. On one particular occasion, he'd spoken up with "This venerable one recalls you didn't make congee yesterday."

"Correct," Chu Wanning replied impassively. "So?"

"This venerable one can't remember what it was you cooked yesterday."

"I didn't make anything from scratch. I just heated up some steamed buns I got from the foot of the mountain."

Taxian-jun was deeply displeased. "This venerable one wants to eat steamed buns too!" he snapped, dark eyes flashing purple.

“Didn’t you say this morning that you wanted congee?”

“This venerable one just decided I want steamed buns! You can’t buy them for *him* and not for this venerable one.”

Chu Wanning stared at him, exasperated. “Forget congee or steamed buns. What you need is help.”

“Steamed! Buns!”

“There’s only congee.”

“This venerable one demands both congee *and* steamed buns!”

Chu Wanning refused to entertain such childish demands. “Eat it or don’t, just as you please.”

Taxian-jun was mad enough to pass out. He grabbed Chu Wanning’s wrist and yanked him close. Caging Chu Wanning between himself and the stove, he leered through lowered lashes. “What’s with the attitude? Why does he get big, fluffy steamed buns, while this venerable one only gets some watery gruel? Tell me the truth—do you think he’s better than this venerable one?”

“I just think your head was screwed on better yesterday.”

Taxian-jun fell silent. At first, it seemed he might lose his temper, but after a moment he said mournfully, “Great… Just great. Chu Wanning, everything you said was a lie. You always say we’re the same person to you—so why are you treating one of us so differently? You won’t even make us the same food. Why do you always side with *him*?”

This left Chu Wanning dumbfounded. “But even the same person might not necessarily eat the same thing for breakfast every day. Stop making a fuss. The congee’s going to get cold.”

“I don’t want it anymore!”

“Seriously?”

“No!”

Chu Wanning nodded. “Fine, then I’ll give it to Goutou. Pity you’re not hungry, though—I put in some Yunnan ham because you liked it so much last time.”

And the examples of Taxian-jun trying to one-up his other self when it came to Chu Wanning's regard went on from here.

Mo-zongshi—steady and easygoing after all that he'd been through over two lifetimes—simply couldn't understand why Taxian-jun would act like this. He was hard at work, completely oblivious as to what deranged antics Taxian-jun would get up to in just a few hours.

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Happy Birthday, Wanning:
Fight for Favor

Chapter 4

THE FOLLOWING morning, Taxian-jun sat beneath the loquat tree in the yard. He peeled one of the little orange fruits for himself, squinting in the sunlight and letting his mind wander.

Taxian-jun couldn't remember much about the past three days since his consciousness had last been in control. He vaguely recalled obtaining a wooden box, which had been given to him by a rice-cake…rice-cake monster. And something to do with a present for Chu Wanning's birthday.

That was it—yet Taxian-jun was wary. After all, that Mo-zongshi was a sneaky little fucker. He might *seem* loyal and tame now, but he had all sorts of dirty tricks hidden up his sleeves. That scoundrel was nothing like himself, a man both heroic and honest, assertive and sincere. No—it seemed a straightforward person like Taxian-jun would always get the short end of the stick.

Taxian-jun heaved a sigh. His purple-black irises glinted as he licked sweet, sticky loquat juice from his fingertips.

This venerable one can't lose! he told himself resolutely. *This venerable one is the emperor—of course I'm far more knowledgeable when it comes to gaining favor among the harem than that guy! As the saying goes, know thyself and know thine enemy to emerge victorious from every battle. If this venerable one can figure out what Mo-zongshi's present is, I can mount a resistance and crush him!*

Resolving to discover the nature of Mo-zongshi's present was one thing. Actually uncovering this knowledge was another matter entirely. He suffered no illusions that Mo-zongshi might relent and have a heart-to-heart with him. In fact, it would be shocking if Mo-zongshi acknowledged him at all.

In that case…maybe he could try to wheedle the answer out of Chu Wanning?

No, no way. Taxian-jun rejected this idea. He remembered how Song Qiutong used to appear in elaborate finery on every holiday, trying to ingratiate herself with Mo Ran while discreetly investigating whether "Consort Chu-meimei" had prepared a gift.

The sight of her always made Mo Ran furious. Staring at Song Qiutong's seemingly clever yet actually very stupid face, it had taken everything in him not to scream—*Why bother asking? Chu Wanning has never given this venerable one a gift, are you happy now?!* But he had quashed his fury and flashed a leering smile before answering slowly, "This venerable one hadn't thought the empress cared so much about Consort Chu that you'd look to my consort's example even in gift-giving."

Fear had flitted across Song Qiutong's lovely features. Yet her terror only made her more deferential and charming; she hoped to win the emperor's pity thus. "This one was only feeling a bit uninspired," she explained hurriedly. "I wondered about Consort Chu-meimei's intentions…"

"Oh… You wondered about Consort Chu's intentions," Taxian-jun drawled, savoring each word. He sneered, eyes suddenly flashing cold. "So do you mean to say you're an empress with no ideas of her own? Perhaps you'd like to be a consort as well? Or maybe—you should be demoted straight to concubine?"

Song Qiutong was so terrified she fell to her knees and kowtowed repeatedly. Disgust and fury roiled in Taxian-jun's chest like dueling dragons. The palace servants knew the emperor's moods were volatile, but no one—not even Song Qiutong herself—could know that she'd truly struck him where it hurt. For all the years he'd imprisoned Chu Wanning, he had possessed the man, but never his heart. The subservience and admiration he wanted from Chu Wanning were as unattainable as the cold moon in the sky.

In all these years, he'd never received a single gift from Chu Wanning on any occasion… Even as snow blanketed the world on the last night of the year, a "Happy New Year" from Chu Wanning's lips was no more than a desperate dream. Song Qiutong had injured his pride and provoked his anger. She had mocked him for having nothing, for being

alone, for appearing self-satisfied while in truth being a bitter, dispossessed wretch—she actually dared… She *dared*!

Emperor Taxian-jun's face had been ashen with fury, while Song Qiutong's was white with fear of him. As he couldn't voice his true feelings, she had no idea where she'd erred. Back then, neither the emperor nor his empress had realized her attempts to gain favor had been doomed from the start.

No—Taxian-jun couldn't ask Chu Wanning.

After reliving this memory, Taxian-jun's convictions solidified. The act of fighting for favor must appear effortless and nonchalant. As with any battle plan, revealing oneself too early was the path to certain death. Asking outright was the worst option.

But how was he supposed to effortlessly and nonchalantly uncover Mo-zongshi's plans? He didn't have much time—Chu Wanning's birthday was tomorrow. Only a few hours remained for him to turn this battle around.

As Taxian-jun ruminated, Goutou ran out in front of him, chasing a colorful butterfly. Perhaps sensing his gaze on her, the dog stopped in her tracks, turning that sidelong stare on the contemplative former emperor. Her eyes seemed to gleam with wisdom and concern.

Aha! An idea struck him. "Good Goutou, good girl, c'mere."

Chu Wanning was presently out surveying the plant spirits on Nanping Mountain. Seizing his chance, Taxian-jun scooped up Goutou and plopped her in his lap, then grinned at her with what he imagined was a friendly expression. In truth, it was terrifying. "This venerable one knows you're a clever, clever girl," he said, stroking her paws. "You understand just what this venerable one is saying, don't you?"

The dog blinked at him.

"Have you seen a small wooden box this venerable one acquired in the past few days?"

Goutou whimpered.

"Listen to me—be good and fetch that box for this venerable one, would you?"

Goutou let out a plaintive whine. *I can't.*

Taxian-jun's expression grew stormy, but he forced another smile. "What if this venerable one gives you a bone?"

"Bark bark!" *Two bones!*

"Okay, two bones it is."

Taxian-jun, ill-socialized as he was for a human, turned out to have a much better rapport with a kindred dog spirit than the vastly more well-adjusted Mo-zongshi. In no time at all, man and dog were scheming together, thick as thieves, though neither spoke the other's language.

"Bark!"

Wagging her tail, Goutou leapt out of Taxian-jun's arms and scampered over to an unremarkable-looking patch of grass. Within moments, her betrayal of Mo-zongshi became complete as she dug up the Dreams Come True box he'd so carefully hidden. Goutou diligently brought the mud-caked box to Taxian-jun.

"So fast?"

"Bark bark bark!" *Naturally—who do you think I am?*

Delighted, Taxian-jun patted Goutou's warm head. "My loyal subject is such a good dog! This venerable one will reward you with—"

Before he could name a suitable reward, familiar footsteps came from outside the yard. Taxian-jun paled. He grabbed the Dreams Come True box and swiftly tucked it into his robes, then turned, feigning calm. "My dear consort is home."

Also feigning calm, Goutou wagged her tail and ran up to Chu Wanning, tongue lolling.

Chu Wanning, back from his patrols, glanced between man and dog. For some reason, a faintly conspiratorial air seemed to hang about them. "What are you two up to?"

Taxian-jun immediately changed the subject. "How is this venerable one's harem?"

"Your Xiao-Cui and Xiao-Hong are dead," said Chu Wanning.

"What?!" Taxian-jun cried.

“There was a storm last night. All the mottled bamboo and red haitang trees you planted on the southern slope were blown over. I told you not to plant them on such a steep incline, but you didn’t listen. Now you’ve learned your lesson.”

Taxian-jun was devastated. When they’d first come to Nanping Mountain, he’d dragged Chu Wanning over to sow the seeds together, brimming with anticipation. He’d teased Chu Wanning by calling those plants his harem. But more than consorts resided within the harem’s rear palace. In his heart, he had come to regard these trees he and Chu Wanning had planted together as their little princes and princesses.

Now, their children had died before their time. How could he accept such news?! “No! This venerable one must see them!”

“What’s there to see?” Realizing Taxian-jun had taken his teasing at face value, Chu Wanning took his arm and explained with a touch of exasperation, “I already cast a spell to heal all the broken plants.”

“They’re healed?”

“Yes, all of them.”

Taxian-jun stared at him. Before Chu Wanning could react, Taxian-jun opened his arms and enveloped him in a crushing embrace.

“What are you doing…”

“I’m happy,” Taxian-jun mumbled.

This was Chu Wanning’s heart. He cared so much for the trees Taxian-jun had planted with such excitement that he’d brought them back to life after the storm without a word. Just as a withered tree would bloom anew come spring, Taxian-jun’s deadened heart had too flushed crimson again with Chu Wanning by his side, coursing with blood, warmth, and love. At last, he could cautiously make his way forward into the light.

And in order to make that light shine a little more upon himself and a little less upon Mo-zongshi, Taxian-jun renewed his resolve to break into Mo-zongshi’s gift. His mind was no good; unlike the clear-headed Mo-zongshi, he refused to acknowledge that they were one and the same, not on pain of death. While Mo-zongshi harbored no animosity toward him, Taxian-jun strove every day and every night to best his other self.

Taxian-jun insisted he would make dinner because he was in such a good mood. Under this pretext, he locked himself in the kitchen and began studying the Dreams Come True box in earnest.

All his instincts honed as emperor of the mortal realm told him that if he could open this box, Mo-zongshi's secrets would be spilled right before his eyes. Yet the surface of this box was perfectly seamless and smooth. How was he supposed to open it?

"Box, open!"

Nope.

"You know you want to open!"

The box, apparently, did not.

"Don't you want to take a look at this venerable one's handsome face?"

The box remained motionless. Nothing Taxian-jun tried seemed to have any effect. Growing increasingly frantic, he resorted to violence. He gathered a beam of red light in his palm and struck downward.

There was a loud *crack* as the wooden stool beneath the box split in two. The box itself remained unscathed.

"This venerable one will not be foiled so easily…" Taxian-jun muttered in fury. He drew his dagger and began stabbing the box. Wary of accidentally demolishing the kitchen, he used only a tiny fraction of his spiritual energy. Yet after hacking away at length, the box showed no signs of damage.

Instead, the commotion attracted Chu Wanning's attention. He knocked on the door from outside. "Mo Ran? What are you doing? What's all the noise?"

"This venerable one is mince—mincing meat!" Taxian-jun panted. "I'm making meat pies."

Chu Wanning paused. "There's some in the ice box left over from when I made wontons."

"Oh. Got it."

Only after those words had passed his lips did Taxian-jun realize belatedly—*wait a moment!* Chu Wanning had made wontons for Mo-zongshi! Where were *his* wontons?!

The more he thought about it, the angrier he became. No way in hell would he let that hypocrite Mo-zongshi win this year!

Storm clouds gathered in Taxian-jun's eyes. He stared at the box, slender fingers tracing its rough grain. A devious idea surfaced in his mind. Maybe…he should just toss the box off a cliff and be done with it.

Wasn't it just a birthday gift? He could find a better one before the sun went down today. He was Emperor Taxian-jun—was there anything in the world he couldn't obtain?

True, he'd detested those days of the past when he'd sat upon the throne, and he cherished the simple warmth of his existence since returning to the mortal realm. Whenever he had the chance, he went down the mountain to soak in the bustle and vitality of everyday life. Under the name Gou-zongshi,[10] he did odd jobs for spare change. Those paltry sums seemed much more precious and meaningful than any of the rare treasures his cowering subjects used to bring him in that frigid, lonely palace.

But no matter how wonderful he found such mundanity, he refused to let his fondness show. Taxian-jun had his pride, and never more so than when it came to drawing a line between himself and the indigent Mo-zongshi. No matter how he adored a rustic dish of cabbage and tofu, he grumblingly insisted his favorite dishes were the elaborate delicacies of an imperial feast.

But sometimes—like now—this performance of pompousness had its uses. Taxian-jun was absolutely certain that, as long as he was willing to run the risk of Chu Wanning thrashing him to death, he could find a luxurious, impressive, unique, and profound gift if he scoured the jianghu for treasures. Surely he could!

This conviction firmly planted in his heart, Taxian-jun stood and reached for the wooden box. He would find an opportunity to dispose of it later this afternoon.

But as he lingered on the thought, his reawakened conscience twinged.

If this venerable one really goes through with it, Chu Wanning will receive one fewer gift. What if this venerable one can't find anything better? What if Chu Wanning really likes this box? If this venerable one destroys it, then…wouldn't he be upset with this venerable one? Pampering him should be this venerable one's first priority these days—so what should I do if he's hurt by it? How would I make him feel better? What if it doesn't work?

The longer he thought about it, the more worried he grew.

It was said no love could exist in the imperial palace, for when an emperor fell in love, he would be reduced to a henpecked husband. This situation was a perfect example. As soon as Taxian-jun started wondering if Chu Wanning might be displeased, he could no longer harden his heart.

Taxian-jun inwardly heaved a sigh. *Pathetic!*

At that moment, a pudgy white blur flitted by the window. Taxian-jun leapt to his feet, immediately on guard. Whatever the thing was, it was moving fast; only a white tail with a blue flame at its tip was visible as it disappeared into the grass.

He poked his head out and looked around. A rolled-up lotus leaf was stuffed between the slats of the window.

The rice-cake monster! His other self's memories of the creature flashed through his mind.

Taxian-jun drew out the lotus leaf and smoothed it in the sunshine spilling through the window. Delighted, he began to read—only for his delight to flash over into rage. "Mo Weiyu, you've got some nerve!" he shouted. "You dare mock this venerable one!"

On the lotus leaf were scrawled a few lines of crooked text:

Hello, Your Majesty! I am a rice-cake spirit here to serve the moocher emperor. I snuck out of my village to bring this message to Your Majesty. This is the Dreams Come True box. Within it is a magical wonderland. The incantation Mo-zongshi set to open it is "gold is an idiot's idea of a gift." This is all the help I can give you. Good luck! You can do it!

Taxian-jun didn't know what "moocher" meant. Maybe these spirits hadn't learned human language properly—this must be some kind of fae slang. But he was quick-witted enough to glean that it was surely a

compliment. That rice cake was so kind! After this birthday business was over, he would have to reward it with a high-ranking office on Nanping Mountain.

He hesitated a moment, looking at the box. Pushing down his indignation, he recited through gritted teeth, “Gold is an idiot’s idea of a gift.”

With a flash of gold light, Taxian-jun vanished from the kitchen.

He, too, had entered the Dreams Come True box.

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Happy Birthday, Wanning:
Fight for Favor

Chapter 5

GAO THE GLUTINOUS was chasing butterflies through Mo Ran's half-built garden on its pudgy little legs when it heard someone come in. "H-h-h-hey," it said, turning around. "Back tho thoon?"

Taxian-jun stared at it for only a moment before turning his penetrating gaze on his surroundings. This landscape wasn't yet finished, but not much was left to be done. Taxian-jun could already get a sense of its elegance, from the kaleidoscopic field of flowers; to the little faeries playing music within each blossom; to the gleaming, golden lotus pond; the treehouse wrapped with gnarled vines; the couch made from an enormous clamshell…

Taxian-jun's expression grew increasingly gloomy. He knew Chu Wanning very well: He may have appeared solemn and serious, but he was actually a deeply inquisitive person. This sort of fantastical refuge was sure to pique his curiosity.

There was only one thing Chu Wanning might not be pleased with—

Taxian-jun turned to glare at Gao the Glutinous, a sharp question issuing from his thin lips. "Was it expensive?"

Gao the Glutinous hadn't yet registered the change in Mo Ran's personality. "Wh-who-who're—who're—" it stammered, confused.

Taxian-jun scowled. He grabbed Gao the Glutinous around its doughy neck and held it aloft. The rice cake let out a squeak.

"Who do you think you're calling a whore?" Taxian-jun snarled.

Gao the Glutinous dropped its butterfly net in terror. Its eyes rolled frantically in Taxian-jun's grip, pudgy legs quivering as it finally managed to eject the rest of the sentence: "Wh-wh-who're you to athk *me* thith quethtion?"

Taxian-jun stared, speechless.

By the time Taxian-jun placed Gao the Glutinous back on the ground, it had nearly dissolved into a shapeless blob of dough. It touched its neck gingerly, panting for a long time before managing to gather its wits.

It was common knowledge in the rice-cake village that Mo Ran's personality changed every fourth day. Gao the Glutinous had been exiled for so long that he hadn't immediately recalled this fact. This ill-tempered, belligerent man before him, then, was not the kind and gentle Mo-zongshi from a few days ago, but rather…

"Ah!" Gao the Glutinous yelped, clambering to its feet. "Help! Thave me! He'th here! He'th here with Bugui!"

The spirit was so scared its stutter disappeared. Gao the Glutinous screwed its eyes shut and sprinted as fast as its tiny legs would carry it. When it dared to crack an eye open, it was shocked to discover it hadn't moved an inch. Taxian-jun had conjured a cage made of spiritual energy containing a spinning wheel, upon which Gao the Glutinous had run like a hamster, going nowhere.

The rice cake swallowed fearfully and raised its head. "Your M-Ma-Ma-Ma-Ma—"

"Are you seriously making a 'your mama' joke right now?" Taxian-jun thundered. "Do you wanna die?"

"Your M-Ma-Majethty, thinthere regardth!"

Once again, Taxian-jun was rendered speechless.

Gao the Glutinous quickly capitulated under Taxian-jun's intimidation. In the interest of saving its own skin, it gave a sprawling, comprehensive account of everything that had happened within the Dreams Come True box. Finally, it reached the question Taxian-jun most dreaded the answer to:

"It'th not ekthpenthive."

Taxian-jun sank into silence.

Inexpensive, unwasteful, and thoughtful to boot—how was he supposed to compete with a present like this?

But—how lucky that he'd discovered it now. If Mo-zongshi were to actually play this card on Chu Wanning's birthday, Taxian-jun would lose

without question. He had to take advantage of the time that remained and burn all this to the ground, he thought fervently.

A dark shadow flitted across his handsome features. As he glared at Mo-zongshi's handiwork, Gao the Glutinous babbled, "Y-y-you can bring me anything from outthide to trade, but thethe thingth here aren't the betht—none of the objectth you brought for the patht couple of dayth were very valuable."

"But this field of flowers looks very valuable," said Taxian-jun.

"That wath a gift."

Taxian-jun pointed at the pond. "This thing doesn't look cheap either."

"That'th what you got for the very betht item."

At this, Taxian-jun's ears pricked up. "The very best, you say?"

"Yeth."

"And what was that? Whenever he can afford to give, this venerable one can too—spit it out."

"Charcoal made by Chu-xianjun!" Gao the Glutinous declared, eyes sparkling.

Taxian-jun blinked. Apparently, he'd misspoken. There was only one type of object in this world he'd never, ever be willing to part with: anything Chu Wanning had cooked. Mo-zongshi had never lived as a revenant in Wushan Palace. He had never sat in that suffocating silence, yearning madly for another taste of those frankly unappetizing yet unmistakably vibrant dishes. As a result, Mo-zongshi had none of Taxian-jun's unhealthy obsession with Chu Wanning's cooking. Quite the opposite, in fact. Mo-zongshi wanted others—whether humans or the forest sprites—to enjoy his shizun's creations, because this made Chu Wanning happy. When he heard how much Gao the Glutinous loved Chu Wanning's charcoal, he was only too delighted to share.

But Taxian-jun was different. He was like a man who'd spent a decade penniless and starving. He hoarded every one of Chu Wanning's dishes with a vengeful ferocity. It didn't matter how bad it tasted—he'd scarf it all down until his stomach ached, refusing to spare a morsel for

anyone else. The most extreme example had been when Chu Wanning, on a particularly slow day, once made five steamers of wontons. He'd intended to store the extras and eat them gradually; the batch ought to have lasted them half a month. Taxian-jun, knowing his other personality would take over the next day, had sprung into action. To ensure Mo-zongshi wouldn't share a single bit of this bounty, he'd devoured every last wonton before midnight. Mo-zongshi had spent the next three days in bed with a stomachache.

Now, hearing Gao the Glutinous express its love for this charcoal, Taxian-jun snapped, "Don't even think about it! Only this venerable one is allowed to eat Chu Wanning's charcoal!"

Gao the Glutinous stared at him, beady eyes filling with tears.

"Crying won't change my mind!"

With charcoal off the table, Taxian-jun began to look for alternatives. "What else can the venerable one trade for even nicer and more valuable things from the fae tribe?"

"Y-Your Majethty can try it out for yourthelth and thee what kindth of itemth you retheive!"

Taxian-jun frowned. "He tried this already?"

"Uh-huh!" Gao the Glutinous nodded. "Jutht a couple dayth ago, you traded in your own shirt for thith field of flowerth."

"I see…" Taxian-jun muttered, stroking his chin. He couldn't lose to himself. He shrugged off his outer robe and handed it to Gao the Glutinous. "This belongs to this venerable one. What will I get in return?"

Gao the Glutinous carefully examined the robe. It said nothing for a long time. Just as Taxian-jun was about to explode with impatience, it hesitantly poked its leaf-topped head out from behind the robe. "Your Majesty, the tradeth are not only up to me—there are ruleth. If you aren't happy with what you get, could you pleathe not grab my neck again…"

"Stop wasting my time. What will you give me?"

"A-all-natural, o-organic growth therum…"

Taxian-jun was sure he'd misheard. "Glow serum?"

“N-no, growth therum…” Gao the Glutinous seemed to be on the verge of tears. “Apply it onthe every three dayth, and in three monthth, the herbth will begin to take effect—y-you’ll be bigger and thicker and harder than before…”

“Do you wanna die?”

“I don’t!” wailed Gao the Glutinous, voice breaking on a sob.

“Why did he get a field of flowers, but I’m stuck with some useless growth serum? Does it look like I’d need something like that?”

“Wah! No, no—it doethn’t!”

“Think of something else! Can’t I get anything else?!”

“No…”

Under the pressure of Taxian-jun’s murderous gaze, Gao the Glutinous sobbed, “I d-don’t make the final dethision, there are ruleth to bartering with the fae!”

Taxian-jun restrained his roiling fury. “You… Forget it.” He had to keep his eyes on the prize. Besides, he was relying on this rice cake to defeat Mo-zongshi. He swallowed his curses and forced himself to calm down.

“Right,” he said, jaw clenched. “Tell me what I need to bring in here to get something that’s better than”—he gestured at the nearly finished landscape—“all this.”

“I-I’m not allowed to thay…” Gao the Glutinous said tearfully.

“This venerable one will kill you if you don’t tell me!” Taxian-jun shouted, veins bulging at his temples.

Gao the Glutinous let out a pitiful wail. It had no desire to be turned into a crispy osmanthus rice cake and eaten. What else could it do? It plopped its pudgy butt onto a nearby tree stump and resigned itself to explaining the trading criteria to Taxian-jun, sniffling all the while.

The rice cake felt around in its pouch with a chubby paw. At last, it fished out a tattered book with a tree-bark cover. Pouting, it handed it to Taxian-jun. The puffed-chest swagger it had adopted before with Mo-zongshi was completely absent.

Taxian-jun didn’t waste his breath on courtesies. He took the book and riffled through it. “A Storm of Flowers—a group of clouds that will float above the courtyard and continuously rain down flower petals,” he read aloud. His curiosity was piqued. “Sounds great. How do I get it?”

Gao the Glutinous meekly reached out and flipped the page.

Price: one living human.

Taxian-jun’s eyes widened. “A living human? A sacrifice?”

“…It’th not that violent,” Gao the Glutinous mumbled. “You jutht have to bring them in and lock them in the bockth… Ath long ath they’re here, the flower rain will fall. Onthe they leave, the flowerth will thtop too. V-very thivilithed!”

“So why does the person need to be locked in here?”

Gao the Glutinous tapped its paws together, seemingly embarrassed. “Whenever there are no other people in the bockth, the rithe caketh from our village can roam ath we pleathe. When you bring th-those thpecial humanth in here, it’th tho we can watch them for entertainment.”

“You fae spirits like to watch people—for entertainment?”

“Th-that’th right.”

“Preposterous! This venerable one would never do something so ridiculous!”

“But you don’t have to get thethe thingth,” said Gao the Glutinous. “Only the motht ekthcluthive itemth require a living human. You can go for the nektht level down…”

As soon as he heard the words *most exclusive*, Taxian-jun slammed the book shut. “Tell me then,” he commanded, crossing his arms. “Who do I have to capture for A Storm of Flowers?”

Mo Ran had been acting very strangely for the past few days, Chu Wanning thought. First, the zongshi had been up in the middle of the night, patting Goutou on the floor with no shirt on. Then the emperor had cryptically locked himself in the kitchen for half an age. He’d claimed he was making meat pies, but by lunchtime, the dough still hadn’t risen. When

Chu Wanning asked what he'd been doing all this time, he said he'd been contemplating the meaning of life.

Even stranger, Taxian-jun was usually very clingy since he only emerged once every fourth day. Once in a while he might go down the mountain and amuse himself with some small clandestine missions, but he'd always be home before dinner, bearing a jar of good wine or a box of desserts, which he'd awkwardly offer to Chu Wanning. Today, however, Taxian-jun had hastily served their lunch, wiped his mouth, then pushed to his feet saying he had an errand to run.

"What do you want for dinner?" asked Chu Wanning. "I'll cook."

Taxian-jun hesitated a moment, then said, much to Chu Wanning's surprise, "No need. This venerable one won't be back until late tonight. You should go to bed first—don't stay up waiting."

Chu Wanning's phoenix eyes widened. Was this the so-called seven-year itch? But it hadn't been seven years yet… Or maybe seven years had long since passed?

He'd completely forgotten his birthday was the very next day.

Chu Wanning had never viewed his birthday in a particularly positive light. When he was a young child in Wubei Temple, Huaizui had given him little gifts on the occasion, toys and sweets. Delighted, Chu Wanning would swing his new wooden sword or stuff pastries into his mouth. He'd grin brightly at the monk and say, "Thank you, Shizun. Shizun treats me so well." At those times, some deeply embedded hurt would flash in Huaizui's eyes, though back then, Chu Wanning didn't understand why.

One year, Huaizui suddenly stopped giving him birthday gifts. Chu Wanning still received sweets and playthings at other times; the monk would produce them from his broad sleeves, as if conjuring marvels from thin air. But no longer did Chu Wanning receive anything specifically for his birthday. He guessed perhaps it was because he was growing up, and adults didn't celebrate their birthday every year.

When he asked Huaizui if this was so, the monk had seemed taken aback. He'd gazed at the ancient cypress in the temple courtyard, then patted Chu Wanning on the head. "That's right," he said. "Wanning is all grown up now. In a few more years, it'll be time for your coming of age…"

Huaizui didn’t look at Chu Wanning as he spoke. His gaze was fixed on the setting sun. Reflected in the monk’s eyes, the red thread of the horizon was like a trail of blood.

The look on Huaizui’s face had seemed incredibly complex then. Chu Wanning hadn’t yet seen much of the world; there were many words he’d learned from books that he had nothing to anchor to in real life. At that moment, for some reason, the two words Huaizui’s expression conjured up were *cruel* and *sorrowful*.

He didn’t understand why such emotions would appear on his teacher’s face when he mentioned his coming of age. But his chest felt tight, as though Huaizui’s pain was his pain too. He stood up next to the seated Huaizui and boldly patted his shaved head, clumsily trying to comfort the revered monk. “Shizun, don’t be sad. Once I come of age, I’ll give *you* a birthday celebration.”

Huaizui froze, then ducked his head so the shadows hid his face. After a long interval, he laughed hoarsely. “Grown-ups don’t celebrate their birthdays… Only little kids do.”

He fell silent. Before Chu Wanning could respond, he abruptly got to his feet. The monk’s loose vestment flapped in the breeze, his broad silhouette blocking the bloody sunlight from Chu Wanning. “It’s getting late. This master has to go out to tend to some things. Be…be sure to study hard this evening.”

He had walked away without sparing Chu Wanning another glance.

For more than twenty years after that, no one had wished Chu Wanning a happy birthday. No one ever congratulated him for making it through another year or wished him health and happiness. Not until he and Mo Ran made their home on Nanping Mountain.

Now, health and happiness were finally his. Now, Mo Ran remembered his birthday with wholehearted sincerity. Mo Ran wanted to make up for lost time.

Unfortunately, Chu Wanning had gotten used to being forgotten, and he’d gotten used to forgetting about himself. The Yuheng Elder stood in the yard, brow furrowed, the matter of his birthday wiped from his mind. *What’s wrong with Mo Ran?* he wondered. Had he done anything lately to

upset him? Or had something happened outside their home to cause him distress? Why were both versions of Mo Ran—the zongshi and the emperor alike—acting so curiously?

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Happy Birthday, Wanning:
Fight for Favor

Chapter 6

[Nine hours until Chu Wanning's birthday]

TAXIAN-JUN ALIGHTED nimbly on the roof of the library belonging to Guyueye's sect leader. Inwardly, he whooped with delight. No one else in the world could've made it here so effortlessly and so quickly. A sword could take its rider to far-flung lands, but even the fastest wasn't as fast as the teleportation technique Taxian-jun alone had mastered.

He was, all in all, extremely pleased with himself.

Taxian-jun could practically hear Gao the Glutinous's words echoing in his ears: "A Thtorm of Flowerth requireth a thpethific Eth-Eth-R perthon. Only Th-th-thect Leader Jiang Yechen meetth thith criteria."

Listening with rapt attention, Taxian-jun had asked, "What does *SSR* mean?"

"Thith ith a fae term," said Gao the Glutinous. "It thtandth for 'thuper thuper rare'—meaning thomeone whothe thuper hard to capture, a perthon we fae thpiritth would conthider very valuable."

Hard to capture? Taxian-jun scoffed inwardly. *That depends on who's doing the capturing*. For him, snagging Jiang Yechen was a piece of cake.

He peered down from his perch on the gilded, cinnabar-lacquered roof beam. Jiang Yechen liked peace and quiet, and he preferred to maintain his distance from others. There were no guards in his library. Taxian-jun's target sat alone by the window, reading a book.

Jiang Xi's health had been poor since he'd been injured in the great battle in the other world. Before, his tall and slender figure had always emanated a powerful, imposing air, but he had grown noticeably thinner after languishing in his sickbed for several months. Though his regal aura

yet remained, his face retained a sickly pallor, seemingly drained of strength. The ravages of his illness had left him with a fragile sort of beauty.

This beauty was no help to him now. Certainly, Taxian-jun had no problem recognizing good looks—and Jiang Xi *was* exceptionally attractive. But the jaded Taxian-jun had seen his share of exquisite beauties without ever learning how to cherish them.

Taxian-jun stared down at Jiang Yechen, unmoved, before positioning himself carefully. He drew the box from his robes and opened it with a soft *snick*. “Dreams Come True box, I choose you!” He tossed the box right at the back of Jiang Xi’s head.

Taxian-jun had imagined that as soon as the box touched Jiang Xi, he would disappear in a flash of white light as he was sucked into the box with a *whoosh*. The lid would snap shut, and the box would wobble back and forth dramatically before finally falling still. Then, having caught the SSR Jiang Yechen, he could obtain A Storm of Flowers.

Tragically, reality did not match Taxian-jun’s fantasy. The moment the box struck Jiang Xi’s head, the sect leader leapt up with an agility wholly incongruous with his sickly appearance. His green and gold robes shimmered as they flared around him, lighting up the library.

The box fell dully to the floor.

Jiang Xi looked up, eyes flashing. “Show your—”

Before he could complete the sentence, Taxian-jun jumped down from his perch in the rafters. Sweeping his hands wide, he conjured a set of chains crackling with scarlet spiritual energy and dove for Jiang Xi.

Jiang Xi’s eyes darkened. With a snap of his sleeves, he soared backward to avoid Taxian-jun’s attack.

Taxian-jun sneered. “All right, third time’s the charm. See if you can escape this one.”

His words were mocking. Taxian-jun had traded blows with Jiang Xi in the past life—then, the battle had dragged on for some time before Taxian-jun had broken him by force. This time, however, Jiang Xi had three key disadvantages: He’d been caught off guard, he wasn’t fighting to kill,

and his body was still weak. It would've been a marvel if he'd evaded Taxian-jun's third attack.

The scarlet chains shot out once more. The instant Jiang Xi moved to dodge them, a sickly sweetness crept up the back of his throat. The speed of his previous maneuver had overextended his frail body, and he bowed his head as a fit of coughing nearly doubled him over.

In a fight between experts, a single misstep spelled defeat. The chains wrapped around Jiang Xi. Tipped off-balance, he crashed to the ground. As he panted for breath, he raised his almond eyes in a furious glare. But when he saw his captor's face, he blinked. "You?"

Taxian-jun clapped his hands and laughed. "Don't worry, this venerable one isn't here to kill—"

"What the *hell* are you doing?" Jiang Xi snarled, cutting him off. "Who sent you to humiliate me like this?"

"Am I humiliating you?" Taxian-jun asked with interest.

Jiang Xi tried to struggle free of the chains to no avail. "Did Xue Meng send you here?" he said, his scowl deepening.

Now Taxian-jun was curious. "What's going on with you and Xue Meng? Does he have such a deep grudge that he'd send me to humiliate you?"

Jiang Xi bit down on his delicate lower lip, refusing to say another word. A few wisps of hair fell across his bloodless face, pale as icy jade. From the shadowy corner of the library, those almond eyes glared up at his captor.

"Tsk, wait a moment." Taxian-jun frowned thoughtfully as he looked at Jiang Xi. "For some reason, your eyes look really familiar all of a sudden. You look a lot like someone else this venerable one knows…"

Jiang Xi froze, then twisted his face away and closed his eyes.

Out of habit more than anything else, Taxian-jun reached out to turn Jiang Xi's face back toward him. Just before he touched Jiang Xi's jaw, he realized with a start that such a gesture would be inappropriate—it was far too suggestive. Even if he only wanted to get a better look at Jiang Yechen's

eyes and harbored no untoward intentions, Chu Wanning wouldn't be happy if he found out later.

Taxian-jun let his hand fall. *Forget it*. He had no interest in Jiang Xi's personal business anyway. Time to take his hostage and trade him in for those clouds.

At this thought, Taxian-jun's mood brightened considerably. He waved a hand, and the chains maneuvered Jiang Xi so he was lying flat, face-up, and carried him sedately toward the Dreams Come True box.

Jiang Xi had never endured such disrespect. "Impertinent!" he thundered. "The nerve of you! Put me *down*!"

Taxian-jun paid him no mind, crossing his arms as he watched with amusement. "This venerable one will put you down as soon as you get in the box. There's plenty of space inside. Don't worry—this venerable one isn't interested in you. You'll be free again the day after tomorrow."

"I'll kill you!"

The chains and their apoplectic prisoner reached the box. Just as Jiang Xi was about to unleash another torrent of abuse, a length of red chain snaked around his back and poked him, hard. He vanished in a beam of light, sucked into the Dreams Come True box.

Chuckling, Taxian-jun retrieved the box. "I did it! I caught A Storm of Flowers!"

At that moment, there was a soft knock at the library door. "Sect Leader, your medicine is ready."

Taxian-jun restrained his triumphant grin. Silently, he opened the teleportation array and sent himself to the nearby port of Yangzhou. Whoever was knocking would eventually open the door to find the room deserted. The book remained by the window, the ink of today's annotations still wet, leaving no clues as to the whereabouts of their sect leader…

[Seven hours until Chu Wanning's birthday]

Taxian-jun made his way along the rooftops of Yangzhou, avoiding the crowded streets and alleyways. Robes fluttering, he used qinggong to leap skyward and landed on the roof of a gleaming and elaborate tiered pagoda. When he reached the very top, he sat to catch his breath.

From here, he could see the city sprawling out in every direction. Pedestrians wound through the streets like threads in woven cloth as evening drew near. But at such a height, all was quiet.

Taxian-jun yawned and lay back on the tiles, his arms folded behind his head. He watched as the clouds were gradually set aglow by the setting sun. Jiang Xi had been captured, he'd set up A Storm of Flowers within the box, and Chu Wanning would definitely love it. Excellent! There was still plenty of time left too—enough to capture a few more SSRs.

Taxian-jun drew a tattered-looking booklet from his robe. Written on the cover in crooked characters were the words: *Human Specimens for Observation*. Eyes narrowed, he scanned the pages.

"There's quite a few of these SSR people," Taxian-jun muttered, stroking his chin. "But this book hardly gives me anything—it only lists which cultivators the rice-cake monsters want to see; there's nothing about what they're worth."

The specifics didn't matter, Taxian-jun decided. He might as well just see who else he could capture. If they were worth something, he'd keep them; otherwise, he'd kick them out of the box, no big deal. He had time and energy to spare, so what were the downsides?

"Jiang Xi, Ma Yun, the Xuanji Elder…" Taxian-jun read the names one after another. Unsurprisingly, he and Chu Wanning were also on the list. At first Taxian-jun was annoyed—these little doughballs dared to dream of observing the emperor of the mortal realm and the Beidou Immortal?!

But after skimming down the names, Taxian-jun realized this book merely listed the most notable figures in the cultivation world. If he and Chu Wanning *weren't* among them, would it not be a slight? At this thought, his annoyance dissipated.

He perused the list of SSRs. He wasn't far from Taobao Estate now. He might as well capture Ma Yun and see what he was worth.

Taxian-jun was a man of action. The instant the idea occurred to him, he was leaping down from the pagoda to make his way to Taobao Estate and take his second hostage. Yet before he could activate the teleportation array, he heard a familiar voice call out from behind him.

“Oh? If it isn’t Mo-xiong?”

Taxian-jun started in alarm. He’d gone out wearing a hooded cloak. Whose eyes were so sharp as to recognize him from behind while he was in this getup?

He whipped around. Next to the goldenrod-yellow wall surrounding the pagoda stood a gallant man with flowing blond hair and eyes like green jade. His skin glowed like fine ivory, even paler than the magnolia blossoms peeking out from the adjacent courtyard. Chiseled features in shadow, the man leaned against the wall with his hands behind his back, lips pressed into a smile as he watched Taxian-jun. “What a coincidence. I didn’t expect to run into Mo-xiong in Yangzhou.”

Taxian-jun had no particularly favorable impression of Mei Hanxue. In the past life, this man had helped Xue Meng stab him in the chest. Xue Meng he could forgive, but he had little desire to speak to Mei Hanxue, who’d been Xue Meng’s steadfast ally in that conflict. Truth be told, he didn’t have much interest these days in anyone other than Chu Wanning. So he couldn’t tell from expressions and gestures alone which of the Mei twins was standing before him. Frowning, he glanced around, but there was no one else nearby. “Are you Big Mei or Mini Mei?”

Mei Hanxue, in contrast, was extremely observant. From this single question and a couple of glances, he’d gathered that this wasn’t the Mo-zongshi he knew well, but the past life’s Emperor Taxian-jun. If only he’d realized this earlier, he wouldn’t have said hello.

But it was too late to take it back now. Mei Hanxue’s smile didn’t falter, but the friendliness faded from his eyes. “I haven’t asked if you’re the obsolete or the new-and-improved Mo-xiong—why is Mo-xiong the first to ask if I’m Mei junior or Mei senior?”

“Obsolete?” Taxian-jun snarled. “*You’re* obsolete!”

Mei Hanxue shook his head and laughed. “Why are you all the way out here in Yangzhou by yourself? Where’s Chu-zongshi—is he not with

you?”

Taxian-jun hesitated. Mei Hanxue’s question had reminded him that he’d come to Yangzhou to capture the SSR Jiang Xi. Mei Hanxue was also an SSR, though who knew what he was worth. Taxian-jun’s eyes lit up. Before catching Ma Yun, he could snap up another valuable human!

Mei Hanxue was an astute reader of body language. At Mo Ran’s strange expression, he couldn’t help taking a step back. He reached to summon his holy weapon, but Taxian-jun was faster. A black blur flashed before his eyes.

“Mo-xiong, you—!”

The last thing Mei Hanxue saw was Taxian-jun opening an ugly little wooden box and pressing it to his forehead.

“What the—”

Mei Hanxue vanished in a flash of golden light.

Taxian-jun snapped the box shut. A devious smile tugged at the corners of his handsome mouth, and his purple-black eyes glinted with determination. “Heh heh, caught another one.”

How could Mo-zongshi’s little trees and seashells and flowers compare to his *two* SSRs? He was owning Mo-zongshi’s ass when it came to this fight for Chu Wanning’s favor!

Satisfied, he shook the box. Then he activated the transportation array and sent himself to Taobao Estate to capture his third hostage—Ma Yun.

Within the Dreams Come True box, Mei Hanxue stumbled and fell, caught off balance when Taxian-jun had stuffed him into the box. He dragged himself back to his feet, coughing and dusting off his robes. His green eyes scanned his surroundings in confusion.

He stood amidst a bucolic landscape that stretched as far as the eye could see. Some sort of otherworldly domain to be sure, for the trees and flowers were unlike those of the mortal realm. Flower petals floated across the sky. A lotus pond was filled with shining golden water, the residence before him was stately and exquisite, and a field of flowers emitted tinkling, ethereal music.

Where *was* he? The more he looked, the more questions he had.

Suddenly, he noticed someone lying on the ground nearby. They seemed to be bound in chains from head to toe.

Who could it be?

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Happy Birthday, Wanning:
Fight for Favor

Chapter 7

GAO THE GLUTINOUS was lying on its belly on the rooftop of the little house Mo Ran had built within the Dreams Come True box. It had selected a large lotus leaf to hide under, the better to spy on the two humans who'd appeared in the box.

Stealth mode, activate! Mwa ha ha ha ha!

Mei Hanxue was mindful of his appearance and never went about with a hair out of place. After dusting off his robes to his satisfaction, he pulled his windswept blond locks into a high ponytail. Having assured himself he was fit to be seen, he turned at last to carefully inspect the poor bastard lying on the ground.

He was wary, but not panicked. He still had the wherewithal to straighten his robes and fix his hair at a time like this because he knew Chu Wanning kept a tight leash on Mo Ran these days. Neither version could possibly do anything truly harmful. What was more, he felt no malevolent or murderous aura in this mysterious realm. The greatest unknown was this stranger who looked to be in the same boat as him.

But when Mei Hanxue got close enough to get a better look at the face of the aforementioned poor bastard, his green eyes widened. It was hard to shock Mei Hanxue, but this had done it. "Jiang…zunzhu?"

Jiang Xi had been bound in chains from neck to ankle. What a pig that Taxian-jun was—after cheerfully tossing the man into the box, he'd forgotten to set him loose.

Mei Hanxue got down on one knee to examine Jiang Xi's predicament. The more one struggled in these spiritual chains, the tighter they became. Given Jiang Xi's station, he'd never been subjected to such humiliation and had no experience with these bindings—he had fought against the chains without cease. Mei Hanxue saw that the shackles around his wrists had broken skin, leaving deep red welts.

“Jiang-zunzhu?”

Even more concerning was the fact that Jiang Xi was still in poor health. After being locked in this box and missing his dose of medicine, he’d fallen unconscious. Mei Hanxue called his name several times but received no reaction whatsoever.

Mei Hanxue was beginning to feel fate was conspiring against him today. What a truly troublesome situation.

His feelings toward Jiang Xi were hardly friendly. Years ago, when Jiang Xi had brought the cultivators condemning Sisheng Peak to the foot of the mountain, Mei Hanxue had staunchly disapproved of his actions and exchanged harsh words with him. Mei Hanxue was easygoing by nature; he didn’t understand Jiang Xi’s fixation on power, nor had he been impressed as he watched Jiang Xi become hamstrung by his own authority since stepping up as leader of the ten great sects.

Plus, Xue Meng and Jiang Xi had always been at odds; there was some indefinable and strange dimension to their relationship. Being close with Xue Meng, Mei Hanxue wasn’t fond of Jiang Xi. Otherwise, clever as Mei Hanxue was, he’d never so openly turn a cold shoulder to the man who was simultaneously the richest and most powerful figure in the cultivation world.

He felt a headache coming on. Why did he have to come across Jiang Xi here, of all places? It seemed he had no choice but to deal with the situation.

Mei Hanxue pressed his fingers to the side of Jiang Xi’s neck, just above his intricately layered collars. His pulse was erratic, his skin feverishly hot. Not a good sign. Mei Hanxue drew back his hand. “Wake up,” he said.

No response.

“Jiang-zunzhu, wake up!”

Mei Hanxue knelt and touched his fingers on the pulse point on Jiang Xi’s wrist to try one of Taxue Palace’s healing techniques. But as soon as he began passing along spiritual energy, he sensed a fiery, roiling energy in Jiang Xi—strong demonic qi was circulating within his body.

Rumor had it that Sect Leader Jiang had been grievously injured in the final battle years ago. Though he had survived, the injury had wrought gradual and unexpected changes upon his body. This seemed consistent with what Mei Hanxue was observing. Perhaps it affected his mood as well—he was kind to Xue Meng on some days and vicious on others; sometimes reasonable, other times not at all. What a baffling person.

Fortunately for Jiang Xi, Mei Hanxue was adept at water-elemental healing techniques. Once he had suppressed the inflammatory energy, the sect leader's lashes began to flutter as he stirred.

Brow tightly knit, Jiang Xi slowly opened his almond eyes. They were unfocused and full of confusion, as if restraining something deep within. Almost immediately, those half-lidded eyes fell closed again. "Medicine…" he mumbled. Though weak, it was an unmistakable command—uttered in his customary tone, honed by years of ordering people about.

Mei Hanxue was both exasperated and amused. "I don't have any."

Jiang Xi didn't react immediately. Only after a moment did he register that this was not a voice he expected to hear. His eyes flew open, and he was so startled he began to cough. "*You?*" he finally managed.

"Who did you think it would be?"

As soon as Mei Hanxue asked the question, he realized Jiang Xi had been half-awake when he uttered the command. In his feverish state, he must've mistaken Mei Hanxue for someone from Guyueye.

Jiang Xi's chapped, bloodless lips parted. "I thought you were…" Before he could finish, an awful heat rose in his chest. He began to shiver, cold sweat soaking his robes. Screwing his eyes shut, he bit his bottom lip, as though doing everything in his power to contain his suffering. Still, his agony was palpable.

Mei Hanxue knew Jiang Xi was proud and mindful of his reputation. He didn't like to show weakness. He must've been in extreme pain for him to behave like this in front of a junior.

Even if Mei Hanxue didn't like Jiang Xi, he certainly didn't hate him. He had a kind heart and didn't like to see others in pain—especially if they

were beautiful. Yes, Jiang Xi was certainly disagreeable, but his beauty was undeniable.

He sighed. “Can you sit up? Would it help if I dispelled the cold for you?”

He reached for Jiang Xi’s shoulder, intending to help him into a sitting position. Much to his surprise, Jiang Xi jerked out of reach.

Panting, Jiang Xi looked up, almond eyes bright and wet. He seemed as wary and distressed as a caged beast. “Don’t touch me,” he rasped.

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Mei Hanxue blinked.

“Take three steps back. Stay away from me.”

“But you’re sick…” said Mei Hanxue, a faint wrinkle in his brow.

“Do you have medicine?” Jiang Xi snapped. Strands of dark hair were plastered to his forehead, and the tendons stood out on his neck.

“I don’t.”

“Then get lost!”

[Five hours until Chu Wanning’s birthday]

Xue Meng sat in the sect leader’s seat within Loyalty Hall, glaring at his unexpected visitor—one Mo Weiyu.

“What do you mean? I don’t understand.”

Taxian-jun fiddled with a willow twig he’d plucked at Taobao Estate. Ma Yun had gotten the better of him this time. Taxian-jun had gone all the way to Taobao Estate to take him hostage, only to learn that Master Ma was out traveling.

He’d taken stock of his options. Out of the remaining SSRs, Xue Meng would be easiest to capture. In fact, Taxian-jun might not even need to *capture* him: He could hoodwink him easily enough. He thus changed course and made for Sisheng Peak.

Xue Meng glared at him. “What do you mean, you’re inviting me to go into that box and check it out? I’m extremely busy—I don’t have time to play games with you.”

“This venerable one guarantees that a wonderful surprise awaits you in that box,” Taxian-jun said inscrutably.

Xue Meng had been in the middle of reviewing scrolls and was already short on patience. “Is something wrong—”

He didn’t say *with you.* A thought had suddenly occurred to him. His birthday was coming up, wasn’t it? And Mo Ran had come by before to ask him what he wanted. Sure, he had tried to be subtle and hadn’t said outright

that he was looking for a gift for *Xue Meng*, but who else could Mo Ran possibly have had in mind?

So was this unassuming-looking box…his birthday present?

He gazed at the wooden box on the table between them, annoyance giving way to interest. Mo Ran said a surprise was waiting for him in the box—it *had* to be his gift. And not only had Xue Meng failed to make the connection, he'd even lost his temper with Mo Ran. How ungracious!

Xue Meng felt rather embarrassed. "Ahem…isn't it a little early?"

"Early?" Taxian-jun blinked. What was Xue Meng on about? He rapidly decided it didn't matter. "No, not early at all. In fact, we're almost out of time. Just get in already, okay?"

Xue Meng's mouth opened and closed several times. He snuck another glance at the box. He had half a mind to refuse again—for the sake of politeness, of course—but in the end, curiosity won out. Unable to contain himself any longer, Xue Meng broke into a smile. "Thanks, Ge—I'll get in now."

Taxian-jun was still confused, but whatever—as long as Xue Meng went into the box. "No need to thank me," he said, unabashed. "Go on, be my guest!"

Xue Meng, too, disappeared into the box in a flash of golden light.

Taxian-jun closed the box with a crisp *click*. "And that's number three," he said with satisfaction.

In just a few short hours, he'd captured the rare personages of Jiang Xi, Mei Hanxue, and Xue Meng. *Emperor Taxian-jun's still got it*, he thought to himself. There were even a few hours left—he could still catch more! Sisheng Peak's Xuanji and Tanlang Elders were also SSRs—no way was he letting them go.

Overflowing with ambition, Taxian-jun tucked the box into his lapels. He wrapped his cloak around himself and set off toward the elders' quarters.

Within the Dreams Come True box, Xue Meng was staring open-mouthed at the scene before him. A pond of gold, a meadow of music, a sky

teeming with flowers, and a crystalline windmill… Yet none of these wonders was more shocking than the sight of two individuals already within the courtyard.

Mei Hanxue knelt before Jiang Xi, speaking to him with his brow furrowed. And Jiang Xi…

Xue Meng gasped.

Mei Hanxue had bound Jiang Xi with metal chains. In fact, he seemed to be in the middle of tormenting Jiang Xi, who was deathly pale, his hair a disheveled mess and his forehead clammy with sweat. This was —!

“Mei Hanxue!” Xue Meng shouted, enraged. “What are you doing?!”

Mei Hanxue whirled in surprise. Seeing Xue Meng stalking toward him, he rubbed his nose in surprise. But before he could either express his astonishment or say hello, Xue Meng had grabbed him by his collar and yanked him to his feet.

Stabbing a finger at Jiang Xi, Xue Meng yelled in Mei Hanxue’s face, “Who said you could do this? Let him go!”

Mei Hanxue’s mouth fell open. “Wait, Xue-zhangmen, let me explain —”

“Jiang Yechen’s a piece of work, but it’s not up to you to put him in his place! Why’d you chain him up?”

Realizing how Xue Meng had misinterpreted the situation, Mei Hanxue couldn’t help bursting out in laughter. “Xue Meng…what are you thinking?” He tugged on Xue Meng’s sleeve. “Why would I chain him up?”

Xue Meng punched him. “How would *I* know why you chained him up? I’m not a pervert like you! Let him go—what’s taking you so long?”

Now this, Mei Hanxue thought, was deeply unfair. *Him*, a pervert? Bro. *He* wanted to let Jiang Xi go. These were Taxian-jun’s chains. How was anyone else supposed to undo them?

The argument among the box’s prisoners grew more and more impassioned. Or, more accurately, Xue Meng and Mei Hanxue argued while Jiang Xi closed his eyes, unwilling to acknowledge or even look at either one of them.

A loud whooshing noise, quickly followed by another, interrupted their fight. Xue Meng turned, then jumped in surprise. “Xuanji Elder? Tanlang Elder?”

Indeed, a baffled Xuanji Elder and hopping-mad Tanlang Elder had appeared in the Dreams Come True box.

“What are you guys doing here?”

“It was that good-for-nothing Mo Ran,” the Tanlang Elder raged. “He showed up without any explanation and pressed that stupid box to our foreheads. He’s asking for it, I’m telling you!”

The Xuanji Elder sighed. “That’s how we ended up in here.”

As Xue Meng stared, Xuanji examined their surroundings. “What is this place? Sect Leader, what are *you* doing here? And Mei-xianjun and Jiang…” Catching sight of Jiang Xi wrapped in chains, Xuanji paled. “Jiang-zunzhu?!”

Uh-oh. The leader of the most powerful sect in the world had been shackled in such a compromising fashion and tossed into a field. Around him were a bunch of people from Sisheng Peak. How would this look?

Mei Hanxue, the only one not from Sisheng Peak, tapped his nose. “Mo-xiong sent me here. Although Jiang-zunzhu is doing his best to ignore me, I believe Mo-xiong captured him as well. Ah, speaking of…” He turned to the Tanlang Elder. “May I ask if you’re the elder in charge of healing arts at Sisheng Peak?”

“What do you want?” Tanlang looked at him with suspicion.

“Jiang-zunzhu is in poor health,” said Mei Hanxue. “Healing is not my specialty. I wonder if you could help him with his injuries?”

Unexpectedly, the ashen-faced Jiang Xi cut in. “No need,” he said through gritted teeth.

“But you’re…”

“It will pass. I can bear it for a few more minutes,” Jiang Xi said, closing his eyes. “Then I’ll be fine.”

Since Jiang Xi insisted on refusing their help, the others could only let him be.

Mei Hanxue and Xue Meng took a walk through the landscape Mo Ran had constructed in the Dreams Come True box.

“How did *you* end up in here?” Mei Hanxue asked.

“This is Mo Ran’s birthday present to me,” Xue Meng said flatly.

“I thought your birthday isn’t for another few weeks?” Mei Hanxue said in surprise.

“Early birthday present,” responded Xue Meng, scrutinizing the scenery.

After Xuanji and Tanlang entered the box, brilliant stars had winked to life across the entire sky. Though the sun had not yet set, these fae-crafted stars glimmered brightly enough to be seen in the daylight. There was also a new scent upon the air, sweet and floral, unlike anything they’d smelled before.

“It’s a nice place,” said Xue Meng. “I just don’t understand why you all had to be sent here too.”

Mei Hanxue considered this. “Maybe it’s to liven up the place for your birthday celebration?”

Tired of walking, Xue Meng sat down on the path between two fields, looking out at the golden stalks of wheat, the willow fluff drifting through the air, and the unending sky above. All his life, he’d been pampered by his parents. Xue Zhengyong was a self-made man, and when Xue Meng was little, Sisheng Peak had been destitute, a far cry from its current prosperity. Despite their circumstances, his parents had never given him any less than a proper birthday celebration. Every year he was praised and doted upon, showered with gifts and love. Xue Zhengyong had done everything in his power to give Xue Meng the very best things, and Madam Wang had always cooked him a delicious bowl of longevity noodles.

Xue Meng had enjoyed more than twenty years of this blessed existence—but now his parents were gone, never to return. Xue Zhengyong and Wang Chuqing had been like two tall, steadfast mountains on either side of the path that was Xue Meng’s life. They had blocked from his view the horrors of death and decline, preserving his fearless innocence and optimism. With their departure, Xue Meng’s heart had lost its battlements.

Pain and cruelty had stabbed into his flesh like bloody barbs, and he came to know the meaning of futility, of helplessness, of death.

But because of their limitless love, Xue Meng's heart of gold was uncorrupted—despite his pride, despite his occasional missteps. Beneath the little phoenix's boisterous exterior, Wang Chuqing's gentle kindness and Xue Zhengyong's steadfast magnanimity lived on. The ember they'd left behind in Sichuan would light the way forward for Sisheng Peak.

Mei Hanxue sat down beside Xue Meng, long blond hair fluttering in the breeze. He tucked an errant lock behind his ear, then glanced at Xue Meng. "In that case…I'll also have to wish you a happy early birthday."

Xue Meng blinked at him, nudging the dirt with his toe. "Whatever," he said gruffly.

"Mo-xiong must have put a lot of care into making this beautiful place for you." Mei Hanxue grinned, leaning back on his hands. A flock of wild geese passed overhead. "If he wasn't your ge, I would've thought he was in love with you, spending so much effort preparing a nice surprise like this for your birthday."

Xue Meng snorted. "Well, seeing as he put you in here too, it's more like a jump scare than a nice surprise."

Mei Hanxue laughed good-naturedly. "The way he's gone all out is gonna put my ge's present to shame…" He abruptly pressed his lips shut, realizing he'd said too much.

"Mei Hänxue got me a present too?" asked Xue Meng.

"Yeah," Mei Hanxue answered. *Shit, why can't I keep my big mouth shut?*

"What did he get me?"

"Can't tell you."

Xue Meng glared at him for several moments before accepting that he really wasn't going to say any more. He turned away in a sulk, feigning disinterest as he gazed out at the scenery with his chin propped in his hand.

"But why would Mo-xiong capture Jiang Yechen for you too?" Mei Hanxue asked.

Xue Meng froze. “H-how would I know?”

The Xuanji Elder called for them in the distance. It seemed Mo Ran had brought someone new into the box—delicate tendrils of mist were spreading through the landscape.

Xue Meng took this opportunity to end the conversation before Mei Hanxue could ask more about Jiang Xi. He got to his feet and brushed dirt from his robes, then strode toward the courtyard. As the fields of wheat billowed in the evening wind, a peaceful warmth bloomed in his chest. This breeze reminded him of Madam Wang and Xue Zhengyong’s gentle touch, smoothing the worry from his brow.

He was lucky to have had such a family, to have been his parents’ son, to have celebrated so many unforgettable birthdays, Xue Meng thought. He was luckier than many others who had never known such love.

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Happy Birthday, Wanning:
Fight for Favor

Chapter 8

[Two hours until Chu Wanning's birthday]

As XUE MENG contemplated within the box, on Nanping Mountain, Chu Wanning sneezed.

He was still completely oblivious to the fact that his birthday was almost upon them. He and Mo Ran had only lived on Nanping Mountain for two years. For two lifetimes before that—half a dozen decades—his life had been a series of unending struggles. Someone used to the bitter flavor of pain and hardship would be unsettled by the unfamiliar taste of sweetness on their tongue. He was precisely one of those people who, according to Xue Meng, had never known such love. The Chu Wanning of the past would certainly qualify, at least.

The night wore on. The hour at which Mo Ran's personalities would switch was drawing nigh, yet he still hadn't come home.

Chu Wanning stood before the bamboo gate to their courtyard. He was wearing only a thin robe, holding Goutou in his arms as he peered into the darkness, where the mist was beginning to rise. Still no sign of Mo Ran. He coughed lightly, hands curling into fists, brow furrowed. Goutou licked his cheek, her tongue making a soft, wet noise as she whimpered for his attention.

Softly, Chu Wanning laughed. "Are you sleepy?"

"Bark!"

He put her down. "Go inside and sleep. I'll wait a while longer."

Goutou whined, then barked again.

In a corner of the courtyard was a pagoda lantern, its bamboo frame pasted over with silk paper. It swayed in the wind, throwing warm light

over Chu Wanning's elegant features. In its glow, his face and shoulders seemed to take on a translucent sheen, making him seem gentler, less sharp than usual. Goutou nudged the hem of his robes, then ran a circle around him, yipping.

"You won't go in?"

"Bark!"

Chu Wanning picked her up again, touching the tip of his nose to the dog's damp black one. "Then you can wait with me."

Goutou barked and whimpered. Chu Wanning had never had a dog; he didn't know how Mo Ran and Goutou always seemed to understand each other, but he was much slower on the uptake. Only after many long moments did he guess what Goutou was trying to say. "You don't want me to keep standing out here—you want me to go inside and sleep too?"

She yipped sharply, excited that her master had gotten the message at last. She wagged her tail and leapt out of Chu Wanning's arms, then jumped up and down on the spot.

"Let's wait a little longer."

"Bark bark bark!" *But we've been waiting sooo long already!*

"You don't want to go in and sleep by yourself?"

"Bark bark!"

As he watched her shake her head and wag her tail, Chu Wanning recalled what Mo Ran had said to him before he left earlier that day. *You should go to bed first—don't stay up waiting.*

"So secretive. What's he up to?" Chu Wanning shook his head. Goutou was still trying to tempt him inside. He cast one last look at the path, then pulled the gate shut behind him. He picked up Goutou and went into the cottage.

Although he was tired, he struggled to fall asleep.

In the wavering light of the candle he'd left lit for Mo Ran, Chu Wanning closed his eyes and curled up on the bed. Gradually, he began to dream.

The face Chu Wanning presented to the world was calm and controlled, but his body, which contained the souls and memories of two lifetimes, was restless. In the first few months they'd lived on Nanping Mountain, he'd startled awake almost every single night. Sometimes he dreamed of Wushan Palace. He'd see Mo Ran's bloodless face after Xue Meng had attempted to kill him, looming over him like a ghost as the thunderstorm raged outside. Sometimes he dreamed of Tianyin Pavilion. He saw Mo Ran kneeling, blood streaming from his chest as he asked through tears—*Shizun, have I paid my debts? Am I clean yet…?*

He dreamed of Sisheng Peak's destruction, of Huaizui's passing. In his dreams, Taxian-jun snarled at him. *Chu Wanning, this venerable one hates you so much.*

In his dreams, he returned to Nanping Mountain on a snowy night. Mo Ran said, *Wanning, I love you, always and forever.* But after those words left Mo Ran's lips, his heartbeat slowed, then stopped. He left behind a night of endless sorrow and despair.

He would never forget how he'd felt that night, a feeling impossible to put into words. Every time he had this dream, he jolted awake from the agony that tore his heart. Every time, he could hardly tell *when* he was. He leaned over and made sure the man sleeping beside him was breathing, that his heart was beating. Only by assuring himself of this, again and again, did the pain gradually recede.

At times like these, Chu Wanning couldn't sleep soundly for the rest of the night. Every so often, he opened his eyes again and looked over at Mo Ran's face, watching the young man's peacefully sleeping visage.

Eventually, Mo Ran discovered this compulsion of his.

Taxian-jun had been in control on that particular night. He'd spent years haunting the desolate Wushan Palace; with a single glance, he knew why Chu Wanning was upset, why he was lying awake in the middle of the night. Without a word, he opened his arms and gathered Chu Wanning tightly into his embrace. Across the chasm of those years, through flesh and blood, he transmitted the steady, vigorous beat of his heart to the man in his arms, chasing away the clinging shadows of those nightmares.

Taxian-jun had kissed his hair. "It's okay now," he said, voice low and gentle. "Wanning, it's all in the past."

Chu Wanning hadn’t said a word. Perhaps he was too easily embarrassed, too unwilling to show weakness. But Taxian-jun could feel wetness through the front of his robes, warm tears soaking his chest. The tears themselves weren’t hot, yet his heart seemed to be burning, vibrating with heat.

He felt an endless ache, an endless love, but he didn’t know what he should do. He’d only ever known how to take possession by force. Providing comfort, making oneself into a safe haven, was much more difficult. He clumsily patted Chu Wanning’s shoulder, lips ghosting over the crown of his head, then his ear, before at last dipping down to capture Chu Wanning’s slightly cool lips.

“Wanning, I love you—always and forever.”

Between kisses, Taxian-jun murmured those words to him again and again. He felt the unyielding man in his arms trembling beneath his palms. Taxian-jun could hold back no longer. Following the same gentle rhythm, with irresistible fervor, he took him once more.

From that day on, no matter which of Mo Ran’s personalities was in charge, he held Chu Wanning as they went to sleep. Every night, before bed, he said—*I love you, always and forever.*

The sweetness of the present would gradually dilute the bitterness of the past. And as Mo Ran repeated this nightly refrain, what had once been a dying man’s last words became a promise of eternity.

For two years, no matter what tasks had drawn Mo Ran outside their cottage during the day, he always returned before nightfall. Even if Chu Wanning never said it outright, Mo Ran knew he didn’t like the stillness of the night on Nanping Mountain. His savior-gege needed him to be there.

Never before had there been a night like tonight’s. It was the first time Mo Ran hadn’t come home by sunset.

Chu Wanning prided himself on maintaining a calm exterior, and he was never one to pry. But his silence and stoic expression too often belied the discomfort in his heart. And this night, after such a long time, Chu Wanning once again found himself in the grip of a nightmare.

In his dream, Mo Ran wouldn’t wake up no matter how Chu Wanning tried to rouse him. The scar Tianyin Pavilion had left on his beloved’s chest

was so awful, so gruesome. He ran his fingers over it, choking on a sob…

"Mo Ran," he mumbled, over and over again.

Mo Ran.

Someone in the dream seemed to take his hand. Someone pressed close and kissed him softly on the lips. Surrounded by grief and darkness, Chu Wanning looked up, despairing. He saw Mo Ran's eyes flutter open once more to gaze at him tenderly. "Shizun, it's okay now. It's all in the past."

It's all in the past.…

Rousing slightly, Chu Wanning felt that his lashes were damp. So he'd only been dreaming. He sighed, chest aching dully. As he tipped once more over the precipice of slumber, he suddenly realized that he was lying in a warm, familiar embrace.

With a start, he lifted his wet lashes. His phoenix eyes met Mo Ran's purple-black irises. At some point, Mo Ran had come home.

"Did I wake you?"

Taxian-jun didn't wait for Chu Wanning to answer. He didn't have much time left, so he cut straight to the point. Dipping his head, he murmured in Chu Wanning's ear, "This venerable one has a surprise for you."

"What?" Chu Wanning said, bewildered.

Taxian-jun grinned, dimples creasing deep in his cheeks—mischievous and adoring. "Wanning, happy birthday."

The bell of some distant temple tolled. Midnight had arrived—it was time for Mo Ran's personalities to switch.

Before Mo Ran could say any more, the haughty edge in his gaze that belonged solely to Taxian-jun blurred into Mo-zongshi's gentle softness. Mo-zongshi blinked, trying to make sense of the fragments of memory from the past day. They made little sense out of context; he couldn't piece together what exactly he'd done as Taxian-jun.

But he was gazing at his beloved now, and boundless joy filled his breast. He pressed his forehead to Chu Wanning's. "Wanning," he said in a

small voice.

“Hm?”

“Happy birthday.” Mo Ran paused. He thought for a moment, then added, “I made a gift for you.”

Originally, he’d planned to tidy up the Dreams Come True box during the day, then bring Chu Wanning inside. But he hadn’t expected Chu Wanning would be awake at the hour of the changeover. Thus he blurted out these words, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. The tenderness he felt for Chu Wanning swept all else aside—he couldn’t contain himself, not even for a moment.

He’d lived through two lifetimes and been married twice, whether legitimately or not. In the past life, they’d entangled day and night for eight years; in this life, they’d been inseparable for the past two. But at that moment, he was like a nervous kid confessing his feelings to his crush for the very first time. He was almost overeager, his fingers clammy and trembling.

“It…it’s not completely done yet, but… I’ll bring you over to take a look, how does that sound?”

Only then did it dawn on Chu Wanning: Today was his birthday. Once he got over his confusion, he felt both amused and mystified, but above all he felt like he was basking in a thousand sunbeams, his chest flooded with warmth. “So that’s what’s been keeping you so busy.”

Mo Ran laughed. “Shizun, do you want to see?”

Chu Wanning sat up, the loose hair framing his face dark as ink. “Sure,” he said with a smile. “What did you make?”

“A fantastical surprise.”

Mo Ran led Chu Wanning into the courtyard. Goutou appeared to be sound asleep, hiding her face under her paw. Mo Ran ducked into a thicket to retrieve the Dreams Come True box.

A screech broke the nighttime peace on Nanping Mountain. “Shit! Where’s my box?!”

Goutou snored a little louder. *Everything’s fine*, she thought to herself. *It’s impossible to wake a dog that’s only pretending to sleep! Mwa*

ha ha ha ha!

Mo Ran squeezed his eyes shut, trying with all his might to recall what he'd done as Taxian-jun. Eventually, he dredged up an alarming trail of crumbs—

Abducting Jiang Xi.

Abducting Xue Meng.

Abducting Mei Hanxue…

Oh no, oh *no*, he was fucking done for!

"Are you okay?" asked Chu Wanning, frowning slightly.

Mo Ran buried his face in his hands. "I… I seem to have done some outrageous things yesterday." He rummaged through their bedroom, frantic. At last, he drew the Dreams Come True box out of his qiankun pouch.

"This is what you wanted to give me?"

"O-originally, yes…"

"Not now?"

Now… Now who knew what kind of terrifying sight awaited them inside.

Mo Ran swallowed. He had half a mind to leave Chu Wanning behind and enter the box alone. But since he'd already said this was his present, it seemed improper to leave his shizun aside. He could only pray he hadn't done anything truly catastrophic.

Steeling himself, he said, "There's not enough time to explain right now… We should go inside together and take a look."

With a flash of light, the pair entered the Dreams Come True box.

The sight that greeted them stunned them both. Mo Ran was gobsmacked: Two days ago, the landscape within the box had looked more or less normal. Now, the little house had been redone with a smattering of obnoxious gold decorations—and that was the least of it. The sky teemed with flowers, the air swam with mist, the wheat fields roiled like the stormy sea, and the heavens were positively bedazzled with stars. What had originally been a peaceful, minimalist landscape had been crammed so full of gaudy colors it was an assault on the eyes.

His vision of a rustic, elegant idyll was gone—painted over by someone with thoroughly vulgar taste.

More horrifying still were the five wooden frames newly erected in the garden. Five living persons—Jiang Xi, Mei Hanxue, Xue Meng, Tanlang, and Xuanji—had been bound to them like scarecrows in their yard.

Chu Wanning looked at these five people displayed like sacrificial offerings. “This is…the present…you wanted to give me?”

Alarmed, Mo Ran snuck a glance at Chu Wanning’s face. What he saw there made his heart drum a violent tattoo in his chest. “N-no, Shizun!” he cried. “It’s not what it looks like! I didn’t do this!”

At that moment, a pudgy rice-cake spirit leapt down from the roof of the house. The blue light on its tail waved to and fro as Gao the Glutinous scampered over, feet pattering against the ground. Doughy face beatifically uplifted, it ran toward Chu Wanning with its paws out wide. “Th-Th-Thacred Tree-xianjun!”

Before it could throw itself upon Chu Wanning, Mo Ran grabbed the rice cake under its stubby arms and held it aloft. On the verge of hysteria, Mo Ran shook the rice cake. “Gao the Glutinous! What’s going on in here?”

“Huh?” Gao the Glutinous failed to register Mo Ran’s personality change for the second time. “A-a-aren’t thethe the Eth-Eth-R humanth you captured? You traded them for all the thingth in thith landthcape!”

Mo Ran fell silent, a vein jumping in his temple. At last, he understood what had happened. He closed his eyes—he almost wished he could throttle his own neck.

What had he done yesterday? Taxian-jun was competing with his other self for Chu Wanning’s favor *again*!

Mo Ran was at a complete loss for words. Meanwhile, Xue Meng, strapped to his wooden perch, had reached his wits’ end. “Mo Ran!” he shouted, furious. “You dog! What the hell are you doing? Get me down from here!”

Gao the Glutinous blinked at Xue Meng and the others, then explained to Mo Ran, “You put them up there a couple hourth ago. You

caught five Eth-Eth-R humanth, but you were worried they'd make a methth in here, so you dethided to tie them all up."

With Mo Ran still motionless and mute, Xue Meng turned to Chu Wanning: "Shizun! Shizun, save me!"

Chu Wanning waved his sleeves in anger. "Look what you've done!" He swiftly stepped forward and released the bonds Taxian-jun had wound around each of the five captives.

When everyone had been released, Xue Meng rubbed the red marks on his wrists. "Mo Ran!" he said sternly, both wounded and baffled. "What kind of nonsense is this?"

"That's right," the Tanlang Elder said, clearly peeved. "Why did you stuff us into this box?" He glared at the rice-cake spirit. "And what the hell is this piece of tofu?"

"I-i-idiot!" cried Gao the Glutinous. "I'm a r-r-r-rithe cake! I'm not a piethe of tofu!"

Mei Hanxue and the Xuanji Elder held their tongues, but their eyes were accusatory as they looked between Mo Ran and Chu Wanning.

Jiang Xi's expression was severe. He straightened his elaborate sleeves, shaking out each wrinkle one by one before looking up. "You two better have a good explanation for this," he said darkly.

Maybe, Mo Ran thought, it wasn't too late to smooth this whole thing over. He raised a hand and said with a smile, "Hey, this is all a misunderstanding. Sorry for the trouble…"

"*Sorry for the trouble?*" Jiang Xi sneered. "You think all will be well if you say *sorry for the trouble*?" Narrowing his almond eyes, he continued bluntly, "Mo-zongshi, did you know I had a business meeting with Huohuang Pavilion today?"

"I-I can compensate you for that…"

"You'll compensate me for ninety million gold leaves?"

Mo Ran blinked.

"Didn't you say you had a surprise for me?" Xue Meng chimed in, his shame having compounded into anger. "I thought it was going to be… I

thought…”

No matter what, *I thought it was my birthday present* was simply too embarrassing to say aloud. Even thinking it was awkward. “What are you *actually* doing?” Xue Meng concluded indignantly.

Mo Ran found himself harangued from every side. Gradually, the voices wore him down until he could only apologize over and over. Under ordinary circumstances, he got along well with all these people. Now they wanted an explanation for the bizarre ordeal they’d endured, but Mo Ran was trying to dodge the subject. It was only natural that they’d hound him for answers.

Mo Ran was still searching for the words when Chu Wanning spoke up from beside him. “I’m sorry. It’s my fault for not teaching him properly.”

The angry crowd fell silent. Only the soft tapping of Gao the Glutinous’s feet could be heard as he continued to run little loops around Chu Wanning.

“Shizun…” Mo Ran turned to him.

“I’ll find a way to pay you back for the time you’ve wasted here,” said Chu Wanning. “I hope you can all forgive me.”

“Sh-Shizun, that’s not what I meant,” Xue Meng stammered, waving his hands. “I just thought this was strange…” He turned to look at Jiang Xi. “You can’t put the burden of those ninety million gold leaves on my shizun. M-my shizun has no money.”

The richest man in the world pretended not to hear Xue Meng at all. Jiang Xi looked hard at Mo Ran, then turned his cutting gaze to Chu Wanning.

Yet before he could speak, Mo Ran stepped in front of Chu Wanning. “I’m sorry, Jiang-zunzhu—I’ll find a way to pay you back. I just ask that you not make things difficult for my shizun today.”

Jiang Xi narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean?”

Quicker than Chu Wanning could stop him, Mo Ran said quietly, “Because today…today is my shizun’s birthday.”

This announcement was greeted by silence.

“He’s never properly celebrated his birthday before,” Mo Ran continued. “So…Jiang-zunzhu, I promise I’ll compensate you properly for your losses. I’ll personally go to Huohuang Pavilion to apologize—I’ll do anything.”

“Mo Ran…” Chu Wanning interjected weakly.

The young man standing between Jiang Xi and himself seemed utterly defeated. “I just ask that Jiang-zunzhu overlook my errors for tonight—would that be all right?”

Today was Chu Wanning’s birthday?! The assembly was shocked by the news. Xue Meng turned pale as joss paper. He stuttered out the beginnings of a few different words before falling silent.

The Tanlang Elder had never gotten on well with Chu Wanning. At this pronouncement, he crossed his arms. “Seriously, Yuheng? Why did you have your disciple abduct us all for your birthday?”

“N-n-no, that’th not it!” cried Gao the Glutinous, jabbing a little paw at Mo Ran. “He a-abducted you guyth because you’re Eth-Eth-R humanth who can be traded in for nithe thingth to decorate thith landthcape!”

Xue Meng gasped. “He wants to trade us in?”

Mei Hanxue, stroking his chin, had more or less figured it out. “So *that’s* why. No wonder more and more environmental effects appeared every time someone new came into the box.”

Jiang Xi was the only one still incensed. “Love really is a disease!” He glared at Mo Ran. “And Mo-zongshi, I’m afraid yours is terminal—you’re *hopeless*!”

Mo Ran laughed and took Chu Wanning’s hand. “I’ve been hopeless for a long time.”

Jiang Xi turned away in a huff. Folding his hands behind his back, he willed himself to calm down. Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed Xue Meng gazing at Chu Wanning like an overeager puppy. He seemed simultaneously aghast that he, Chu Wanning’s disciple, had nearly missed his shizun’s birthday, and contrite that he had no present to give to Chu Wanning himself. Jiang Xi was too jaded to pity him; Xue Meng was astonishingly embarrassing. But if he lost his temper now, it would put Xue

Meng in an awkward position too. Eventually, he shook out his sleeves. “Fine. After all, it’s only ninety million gold leaves.”

Mo Ran and Xue Meng both blinked in amazement.

“No need to pay me back. The money’s not even enough for me to polish my shoes.”

Now it was Mei Hanxue and Chu Wanning’s turn to be stupefied.

“Just how dirty are your shoes?” asked Xue Meng.

Jiang Xi turned to fix him with a vicious glare. “Xue-zhangmen, there’s no need to speak just to show you have a working mouth,” he said, voice dripping ridicule.

“You—!”

The motive behind these farcical kidnappings had been revealed in the commotion, and Chu Wanning’s birthday had been made known. In the end, all the captives promised not to tell anyone about what had happened, and to keep the Beidou Immortal’s birthday a secret.

But since they were all gathered within the box, they thought, why not stay for the celebration? As Xuanji said, perhaps this was fate.

Gao the Glutinous was delighted to see the atmosphere thaw. As far as it was concerned, it had completed the duty its village had bestowed upon it. Not wanting to miss out on the fun, it scurried closer in delight, only for Xue Meng to pin it with a glare. “Mo Ran, is *this* the creature you came across in the backwoods?”

“Sure is,” Mo Ran replied with a grin.

Xue Meng studied the rice cake carefully, stroking his chin. “It really is made of osmanthus rice cake.”

Gao the Glutinous brandished the blue flame on its tail. “I-I-I’m the cooletht kid in my village!”

“What a coincidence, I’m the coolest kid in the lower cultivation realm.”

“Then we should be friendth,” pronounced Gao the Glutinous.

“Then I should cook you for lunch,” said Xue Meng at the same time.

The rice cake froze, then took two quick steps back on its short little legs. A moment later, it sprinted away. “Xue Meng is tho thcary! Thith ith cultivator-on-fae violenthe! Wahhhhhh!”

Xue Meng guffawed. At least he’d gotten his revenge for being kidnapped and turned into a scarecrow.

On this peaceful night, a modest handful of old friends gathered within the Dreams Come True box. Not all of them were especially close to Chu Wanning, but as Xuanji had said, perhaps it was fate that they’d all ended up there together. Since everyone was here, and no one was tired after all the ruckus, the group agreed they might as well have a midnight snack in this peaceful realm. They built a roaring fire and gathered around the table for a celebration beneath the moon. The golden pond supplied them with fish, and the breeze carried away the bonfire’s smoke. Pearl-like kernels of corn, freshly washed, simmered away in a pot. The fragrant aroma of food floated through the pastoral fields.

Mo Ran stood in the kitchen of the little house, stir-frying a dish with practiced movements over the searing fire. Whenever he shook the wok, flames licked upward to illuminate his handsome face. He turned to see Wanning chatting with Xue Meng, Xuanji, and Tanlang as they collected fresh fruits from the fae tribe, Jiang Xi strolling through the fields as he waited for food to be ready, and Mei Hanxue teasing the little faeries among the flowers, teaching them to play the melodies of Kunlun.

Mo Ran was in an excellent mood. Part of him did yearn to have Chu Wanning all to himself, but his shizun was so good—he also wanted him to receive the well-wishes of others and enjoy their company. Though in a roundabout fashion, Taxian-jun had inadvertently made this wish come true.

The waters within the Dreams Come True box were dotted with peach blossoms, and plump mandarin fish flourished beneath the surface. Mo Ran’s slender fingers arranged tender bamboo shoots and sliced them into delicate strips. He quickly blanched them in a clear broth with some fiddleheads, then turned his attention to cleaning the fresh fish and shrimp.

The curtain swayed behind Chu Wanning as he entered the kitchen.

“Just a bit longer, Shizun—almost done.”

“No rush. I’ll bring some fruit out to the yard for them.”

“Okay.” Mo Ran grinned.

Chu Wanning crossed to the corner of the kitchen to fetch the wicker basket of fruit. As he drew near, he spotted an earthenware vessel nestled in the same corner. A seal around the top bore the legend, in an awkward-looking hand, *Happy Birthday.*

He picked up the jar. Judging from the handwriting, it must have been from Taxian-jun. Chu Wanning broke the seal and looked in, but he couldn’t tell what exactly was inside. “What is this?”

Mo Ran came over to take a look. “Ah,” he said in recognition, then let out a rueful laugh. “I guess he succeeded in making his pear-blossom rouge cured goose?”

“What’s that?”

“A recipe my other self developed—it’s a time-consuming dish. First, the goose is cured in salt, then wrapped in a lotus leaf and steamed. Then it’s cooled in running spring water and thoroughly chilled in an ice bath. After the meat’s cold, it’s soaked in a jar with pear-blossom white wine.”

Mo Ran removed the goose from the jar—it had the cool, pungent scent of liquor. “He must’ve made it as soon as he entered the Dreams Come True box.” Quickly slicing off a piece, he tested the flavor of the cured meat and smiled. “I guess he didn’t only do bad things.”

He placed the rich goose meat onto a ginkgo-wood board and cut it neatly into thin slices. Between the luster of the pear-blossom white and the vivid hue of the cured meat, it really did look red as rouge, tender and decadent.

Mo Ran thought for a moment. “Shizun, check the sauce cabinet—there should be another little jar in there.”

Chu Wanning peered inside. A yellow-glazed jar was indeed waiting in the cabinet, also sealed. On it was written in the same crooked hand, *To whet the appetite.*

He shook his head, chest welling with boundless warmth. Chu Wanning handed the jar to Mo Ran and watched as he used a little bamboo spoon to scoop some of the sauce Taxian-jun had prepared the day before.

Mo Ran carefully drizzled it over the cured goose, the sauce napping the rich meat. Its aroma, coupled with the heady smell of the wine, was intensely fragrant.

“How did you come up with this dish?” asked Chu Wanning.

“During the hottest part of the summer, there was a day you wouldn’t eat more than a few bites of my cooking… Do you remember?”

Thinking back, Chu Wanning did. Not long ago, Taxian-jun had gone off to the kitchen in high spirits and whipped up a table full of delicacies. But the heat had left Chu Wanning without much of an appetite, and he had scarcely touched the feast. Taxian-jun hadn’t said anything at the time, but in retrospect, he’d looked rather glum.

“I guess I felt sad that I couldn’t make anything that would satisfy the person I loved.” Mo Ran turned to smile at him, sleeves rolled above his elbows. “I pondered day and night, and I even went out to some restaurants to study their tricks. Finally, I invented this recipe.”

He glanced at the pear-blossom cured goose. He felt suddenly apprehensive, unsure how this offering would be received, yet also expectant, eager to be praised for his other self’s work. “Wanning, do you like it?” he asked cautiously.

Chu Wanning was quiet for a while, then smiled. He carefully tucked away the two labels Mo Ran had written yesterday. Then he picked up the plate of glossy, succulent cured goose. Before he stepped out of the kitchen, he turned to look at the handsome young man standing at the stove. “I like it very much. Thank you, Mo Ran.”

Whether in this life or the previous one, regardless of which personality or soul—thank you, Mo Ran. Thank you for being here. Thank you for giving me the best birthday of my life.

I used to have a shizun, but those celebrations weren’t genuine. You used to have a mom, but your lives were too hard; you couldn’t even eat a proper meal. Now, all that’s in the past. I’ll remember the day you were born too—on that day, I was still in the temple, ignorant of the mortal realm. I had no idea the person with whom I’d spend the rest of my life had come into this world.

But I'll be by your side this year, and every year after. From now on, we'll always be together.

At last, the meal began. Though it wasn't anything extravagant, very few had ever tasted Mo Ran's cooking. He was an excellent cook, and as this was Chu Wanning's birthday meal, what he'd made was even more delicious than usual. Even Jiang Xi, accustomed to eating all sorts of exotic delicacies, couldn't stop his almond eyes from widening. He glanced at Mo Ran from across the table in apparent disbelief. He had half a mind to ask if Mo Ran might consider becoming a cook at Guyueye—an offer that would naturally come attached with a mind-bogglingly high salary.

But Jiang Xi was a smart man. When he saw how Mo Ran looked at Chu Wanning, he swallowed his words, slightly nauseated. Before he left this earth someday, Jiang Xi resolved, he needed to invent a drug that could pull love out of a person's heart by the roots. Love was a debilitating disease. See how such a promising culinary talent's prospects were dashed, just like that.

Might as well eat his fill of this meat while he could, since he wouldn't get another chance. He looked down expressionlessly, chopsticks moving with a graceful swiftness.

Just as the feast was reaching its merriest point, Xue Meng glimpsed several white blurs moving through the fields. He wondered for a moment if he was hallucinating. He rubbed his eyes and exclaimed in surprise, "So many rice-cake spirits!"

The little fae creatures scurried through the scenery. Hiding in the grass or between two rocks, they snuck surreptitious glances at the humans, indulging in their favorite pastime. Yet they seemed unwilling to let the humans get a good look at them. Blue tail-flames swaying, they scampered about, their feet making tiny pattering sounds. The only exception was the coolest kid of all, Gao the Glutinous. It stood high in a tree, out of Xue Meng's reach, its hands on its hips, translating between the fae and human languages.

Alas, its human language skills were still hopeless.

"Thacred Tree-xianjun, wishing you the happietht of birthdayth!"

Xue Meng glared at the rice cake. "Happie*st*? Of birthday*s*?"

“A-a-ath if I need you to correct me! I’m ekthellent at thpeaking human! My ackthent ith v-v-v-very good!”

Mei Hanxue burst into giggles. He put a hand on Xue Meng’s arm before the enraged sect leader could fire another volley at Gao the Glutinous. “Now now—our language really is very difficult to learn. Stop laughing at it—it’s a very cute little rice cake.”

Xue Meng glared at him. “Don’t touch me!”

Catching the festive mood, a few rice-cake spirits launched fae-crafted fireworks from one of the nearby mountains. The brilliant display lit up the starry sky, washing every corner of the landscape in vivid colors.

Xuanji watched the fireworks appreciatively. Raising his cup, he smiled at Chu Wanning. “Yuheng, happy birthday.”

“Happy birthday,” grumbled Tanlang.

Mei Hanxue drew a breath, but Xue Meng cut him off. “Me first, me first! Shizun! I wish you a lifetime of health and happiness, of peace and prosperity! C-come visit me at Sisheng Peak often!”

Listening to them all go around giving their well-wishes, Chu Wanning felt rather embarrassed. He was unused to this—or rather, he didn’t know how to respond to such warm regards. After all, it was his first time receiving them.

Unseen by the others, Mo Ran took his clammy hand beneath the table. He chuckled to himself—his shizun looked as calm and unflappable as ever, but his fingers were trembling. He gripped Chu Wanning’s hand more tightly, interlacing their fingers. Gradually, as warmth passed between their palms, Chu Wanning’s fingers stilled.

Mo Ran looked at him. Within the gently undulating fields of wheat, beneath the starry sky with its drifting flowers and magnificent fireworks, Mo Ran said solemnly, “Wanning.”

Then he laughed. The fathomless love in his dark, nearly purple eyes had brewed for two lifetimes. Now, it spilled out under the brilliant stars. “Happy birthday. May your days be filled with peace and joy.”

Three decades of hardship, two universes interwoven.

Beneath the dazzling fireworks, Mo Ran's eyes shone, brilliant and slightly damp. His face contained all of Mo-zongshi's sincerity, Taxian-jun's stubbornness, and the good-natured kindness of the boy who'd once, so long ago now, stood beneath the Heaven-Piercing Tower.

They'd traversed two lifetimes, arriving at last in this idyllic refuge nestled between the rivers of Jiangnan. Nanping Mountain was a place of serenity and prayer, where they could hear the chants and evening bells of distant temples. They'd been each other's salvation for two lifetimes and survived all their mortal trials. All these years later, fate still bound them together as tightly as ever, inseparably entwined.

At last, peace was theirs.

Mo Ran knew he'd spend a lifetime saying to Chu Wanning, *Happy birthday. May your days be filled with peace and joy.*

Someday, snow would dust his hair, and frost would dye his brow. Even then, he would guard the flame of his life.

I once forsook your heart until the twilight of our years. For the rest of my life, I promise you endless days of peace.

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The Husky & His White Cat Shizun
FIN

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Afterword

OF COURSE, I have to start with thank-yous! First, let me thank the readers and everyone who contributed to the English edition of *Husky*! Thank you very much!

And another thank-you to the publisher: Thank you for inviting me to write about my thoughts on *Husky*'s publication. In the age of the internet, every word posted runs the risk of being misinterpreted a thousand different ways. Faced with that kind of futility and powerlessness, it feels like many people are starting to lose the desire and courage to speak their mind, or even speak at all. I feel that way too. But after communicating with Seven Seas via Sandy, I had a chance to sit down and think about whether I should write something to mark the completion of this book—not about whether what I say will sound juvenile, or whether my opinions will be distorted. That's right—why lose out on the chance to write a proper afterword for my first North American publication just because of some baseless worries? So I'm very grateful to Seven Seas for the invitation, because I don't think I would've written this afterword without it.

I'm not embarrassed to say it: Ever since I was little, I've dreamed of having one of my books published overseas. I can't believe this dream has actually come true. What's more, another childhood wish of mine came true too—a few years ago, I found a questionnaire I'd answered in elementary school. One of the questions was "What do you want to do when you grow up?" And I answered, "Write essays all day and night." It's funny, isn't it? I was so young at the time that my first thought wasn't even about writing novels. It was writing essays.

Why would that be my childhood dream? To me, answering that question is as easy as breathing—it's because I hated school as a kid. The only thing that interested me, the only thing I could be even a little bit proud of, was my writing. Imagine a penniless little kid. If all she had was one single cookie, and you asked her about her hopes and dreams, obviously she'd tell you she wanted to eat cookies all day long.

Growing up, I wasn’t a good student. I didn’t like the sciences, and in almost all the mock exams we did in preparation for college entrance exams, my score in language arts was higher than my marks in math, physics, and chemistry combined. It was even worse in elementary school—I skipped class, didn’t do my homework, and my teacher called my parents every day (absolutely don’t learn from my example…).

But it wasn’t that I disliked school as a whole. Looking back, the reason I ignored my homework and resisted going to school was because I was obsessed with reading for pleasure. I’d read anything I could get my hands on, and when I found an exciting story, I’d stay up late to finish the whole thing, reading underneath the blankets with a flashlight. As for school, I either skipped to go read novels in the park, or skipped to read novels at a bookstore. Regardless, I ran from a place that wanted to teach me to read proper academic books to somewhere else, where I could read whatever I wanted, however I wanted. (Seriously, don’t do what I did! It’s important to focus on your studies! God knows how much effort it took for me to make up for some of the lessons I skipped…).

Neglecting my priorities this way, I read more and more. One day in sixth grade, as I was holding my tray to get lunch from the teacher as I always did, I was suddenly told that my essay had ranked first place in the entire city. I stood there dazed with my tray in my hands, and all my classmates listening were equally amazed. Nobody believed it could be me. My teacher was the only one smiling, a sweet, cute smile that had never been directed at me before. A terrible student had taken first place in the whole city. In the days that followed, I felt like I could’ve flown right into the sky—I hardly knew where I was. I wanted to get a tube of super glue and stick the certificate on my forehead. If one of my neighbors asked me if I’d eaten yet, I’d probably say, “Yes, Auntie, I just ate dinner beneath my beautiful brand-new award certificate that says I took first place.”

After that, I knew what I wanted to do when I grew up. I wanted to write all day and night.

What career could be greater than this? Writing was capable of making my parents proud of me. Before that, I’d never really known what it felt like to have someone be proud of me. I treasured the feeling immensely.

Later, when I went to middle school, I regularly won city-wide, provincial, and national essay competitions. My school made big red banners to recognize award-winning students and hung them outside the doors, and my name probably appeared most frequently. So frequently that even though I came dead last in every math test, my homeroom teacher, who was also my math teacher, persevered in thinking I could be taught—but it could also be that our language arts teacher defended me if he was ever mean. My ego inflated to the point that I started seriously considering writing a novel.

To be honest, I'd written novels before, but only haphazardly when I was tuning out in class or procrastinating on my homework. Just as new artists often start by copying the works of others, my first stories were inspired by poetry anthologies, the type we had to read in school. The plots were totally bizarre; for example, the female lead would recite ten thousand words in verse before falling off a cliff. I didn't know why it took her so long to fall either, nor did I care. Such beautiful poems shouldn't be interrupted; she'd best recite three hundred great verses of the Tang dynasty before paying her respects to gravity.

This time, when I picked up the pen once again, I did it very carefully. At least if the female lead tipped off a cliff in this novel, she'd fall right away. I made my classmates read it when I was done, though it was probably terrible. They all looked at the "comment section" I'd drawn nervously, unsure where to begin. Nobody asked for a sequel.

But I wasn't discouraged at all. I was convinced everyone was actually just jealous of my outstanding talents, so I continued writing my awful stories with confidence. When none of my classmates wanted to read them, I serialized them through my writing assignments and forced my language arts teacher to read an installment every week. After all, she had no choice but to mark them, and she *had* to give written feedback. She was a more reassuring reader than any AI chatbot.

Looking back on it, the poor woman must've been exhausted. She definitely took some psychological damage, so I'd like to take this opportunity to say sorry, and thank you. I'm certain the principal didn't pay her extra for the mental anguish incurred from dealing with such a difficult student. Truly, to be an educator is an admirable choice.

Youthful delusions are a very real thing. But I had nowhere else to put that childish pride and idiocy, so I loudly proclaimed that I'd be an author when I grew up. If you laughed and said a sparrow shouldn't dream of being a swan, I'd boast that my books would sell all around the world, and even be adapted for TV. Back then, I'd heard the famous writer Eileen Chang once said you had to chase fame while you're young—I didn't know if that was true or not, because at the time, I'd never even read anything by Eileen Chang. I did know that some people thought the mere mention of her name was enough to confer an air of sophistication, and of course my delusions and I wanted to sound cultured by association. I'd go around shouting at the top of my lungs—*Hey! Eileen Chang said you need to chase fame while you're young, and I'll be sure to get famous young as well!*

I keep scratching my head as I sit here in front of my computer typing this, because it's so embarrassing, but it's also really funny. It's like I'm looking through the screen at an egotistical and annoying little twerp.

That unadulterated fervor I felt back then, that courage undaunted by anyone else's attitude or opinions, still feels very precious to me. While writing *The Husky & His White Cat Shizun*, I possessed that kind of fervor and courage. I wasn't afraid of anyone's attitudes or opinions because I believed everyone would try their best to understand their fellow humans. Even when misunderstandings arose, or people had different preferences, anything could be resolved through communication. If you poured your heart into writing your story—if you put your joy and heartfelt sincerity on display—people would be able to tell.

Later on, I knew I was mistaken.

But back then, I assumed the best of human nature and treated the internet as a place where I could speak my mind, a place I could relax and have fun and make silly quips. Because there was much I didn't know, I assumed the internet would accept me as a friend. Some things were much more complicated than I'd realized.

For example, more often than not, it's not that people *can't* understand one another, but that they don't want to try. Things on the internet are always changing—sometimes, they were distorted to levels I could hardly imagine. At the beginning, I'd do my best to explain, but eventually I stopped saying anything at all. I realized it wasn't doing any

good. Regardless of how I tried to defend myself, those who disbelieved me couldn't be swayed. It didn't matter what I said, or if I said anything at all. I'd beat myself up over it and end up exhausted, so I slowly learned to let go. As an author, I can't waste too much of my energy on things that don't matter. There's only so much concentration a person can have. I'm better off burying my head in my work and focusing on writing my stories.

Now, my opinion is as follows: I'm delighted if you like my stories. Thank you very much. If you don't like my stories, that's fine too. Loving a story is something that needs to happen naturally, just like choosing someone to date. Other people will love my stories, and I hope you'll be able to find something that suits you as well. And if your dislike of my stories develops into a dislike of me as a person—that's fine too, because it's not like I'm dating you.

To be honest, many things are much simpler than the internet makes them out to be. Often, the cause is simple, as are the underlying reasons. I wrote *Husky* because I had an interesting story I wanted to tell; I wanted to write because it was once all I had, because I wanted to earn money, because I wanted to afford nice things, because I wanted to improve the lives of my family, because I wanted to make my mom and dad proud of me, because I wanted people to read my stories and then praise me—I'd be very happy for some praise. I've never been a perfect person, but I know I've never been an awful person either. I'm just a regular human being who pursued a lifelong dream and hobby. One day I saw a little bit of success and didn't know how to react to everything that followed. That's all.

The English publication makes me feel like that little bit of success has become even more rewarding. I think of creative work as a bridge that can close the gap between different cultures, helping them understand each other, and the thought that I might've added my own teeny-tiny little brick to this massive bridge makes me happy.

I've lived overseas; I know the world's perception of China and Chinese culture remains very superficial. Certain old-fashioned prejudices persist in Western consciousness. For example, in 1913, Sax Rohmer's novel *The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Manchu* engraved prejudices into Westerners' heads, but if novels can evoke hatred and fear, I thought—why can't novels also erase these things?

I’m Chinese—my stories mention Chinese myths and Chinese food, and the characters in my books have the values and beliefs of Chinese people. They’re Mo Ran, who suffered so deeply and yet still thought, when lucid, of “building countless houses to shelter all the people in this world who don’t have homes, so everyone can smile”; they’re Chu Wanning, who asked, “If you don’t know how to save others, how can you save yourself?” When I wrote about the seven taboos of Rufeng Sect being greed, resentment, deception, slaughter, obscenity, plunder, and conquest; when I said the world was so beautiful it was enough just to have flowers, undyed by blood; when I spoke of a loyal heart remaining constant in life or death—I was talking about belief in kindness and belief in love. Kindness and love can persist even in the darkness of night and the coldness of winter; wherever there are people, there will be darkness, but there will be kindness and love as well.

The Husky & His White Cat Shizun is a love story, but it’s also full of themes that have nothing to do with romance: respect, faith, mortality, and idealism… Its plot, narrative structure, descriptions, characters, and core concepts involve many ideas from Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist teachings. I never went out of my way to incorporate these things while writing—after all, I never thought there’d come a day when the book would be published in other languages. This story simply contains the uncontrived views and emotions naturally expressed by a Chinese author.

To make a long story short, no matter what country you’re from or what ethnicity you belong to, human nature is the same. I think the reason *The Husky & His White Cat Shizun* resonates with readers in other countries is because, in that moment, we’ve understood and connected with each other. As human beings, we all gravitate toward kindness and venerate love; we treasure those dear to us, whether friends or family or lovers; we hunger for those glorious dreams; we have the same inquisitiveness toward sex, the same fear and distaste for hatred, the same revulsion of atrocity, interest in the unknown, curiosity about human nature… And if we could all understand and connect with each other more often, there’d be a little less malice and conflict in the world, and a little more respect and camaraderie.

To me, reading and writing are both precious, but their value doesn’t reside in bragging about the great authors one’s read, or showing off one’s vocabulary or knowledge in order to haughtily look down on others. That’s

not “reading” books, that’s sticking books on your head like a bunch of sparkly baubles—totally useless, save for making you look like you’ve got a big head.

Reading and writing are for opening one’s heart. Through the power of words, we keep misunderstandings and grudges from forming, and keep fear and hatred from growing. The bridge of communication that spans countries, ethnicities, and cultures is built from all those hearts thus opened.

So I’m truly happy that there are English-language readers who love my books. Your enjoyment links us across mountains and rivers, allowing us to be the closest of friends without ever glimpsing each other’s faces. I once developed an interest in—and a little understanding of—your culture through foreign literature, before I’d ever set foot outside of China. I’m grateful to those authors for carefully crafting that local and authentic sense of place, the kind of picture a travel brochure could never paint. And now, I’m proud to have had the chance to share with you the world and culture I live in—to show you the beautiful facets of China. The fact that I can take the role of a tour guide in this way, however insignificant, makes me emotional, embarrassed, and above all happy.

If, one day, my English readers get the chance to travel to China for real, I hope *The Husky & His White Cat Shizun* will become a secret travel guide in your pocket.

For example, having read these books, you probably know Chinese food should be ordered to ensure a variety of textures and flavors, both from meat and vegetables, are on the table, like a symphony that requires the voices of many different instruments. You’ve learned how to enjoy gudong—or hot pot—and what chili-oil wontons are... You’ve learned Sichuanese cuisine loves numbing spices, while Jiangnanese cooking prefers lighter flavors that showcase fresh ingredients. You know Nanping Mountain lies in Hangzhou, surrounded by the dreamy echoes of temple bells, whereas Sichuan in the old myths really is the border between the mortal and the ghost realms. The ghost capital Fengdu stands tall while the waters of the Baidi River flow on to the underworld… When I think about this, I’m all the more delighted that my books have foreign-language translations. That’s not something I ever dreamed of while writing *Husky*.

I’m so emotional knowing the English edition is now complete, both happy and thankful. My dearest wish is for you to have liked the story after finishing it, and it’d be even better if, years in the future, you’re reminded of it from time to time. If you bring this book to China on your travels and order food based on the main characters’ selections, if you eat it and think “Aiya, Chu Wanning and Mo Ran have such good taste! It was a great idea to follow their recommendations,” and then go home satisfied, I’ll be utterly overjoyed, and I’m sure both Chu Wanning and Mo Ran would be happy as well.

All right, I’ve already said so much. At the end of this afterword, I want to return to what I mentioned in the beginning—the novels I wrote back in middle school. Those early stories represent the motivation that kept me writing from the very start, as well as the ultimate reason behind *Husky*’s existence—

That reason is, in a nutshell, my parents—my wonderful, wonderful parents. When I was still a student, the school put together an anthology of students’ writing. A modest number of copies were printed and circulated among the students, with a few volumes put on display in each classroom. One semester, a story of mine took up many pages in this anthology. I wanted to please my parents, so I told them a lie: I said that all my classmates were fighting over the anthologies because they wanted to read my story; there weren’t enough books to go around. So my father printed a whole bunch of additional copies for the school. It was a sunny day: He was walking his bike with a bundle of anthologies tied to the rear seat. He had loaded it up with books my classmates didn’t actually want to read and proudly brought them to the school’s front gate for me. Every time I think about giving up in the middle of a story, this memory comes to mind.

I see him smiling, and I don’t want to disappoint him.

And now there are finally so many people who want to read the stories I tell. I’ve finally made my loved ones proud and happy, and for that, I feel so very fortunate and lucky. I want to share my deepest appreciation for every single one of my readers through this note: I am so grateful to all of you, no matter where you are.

I want to bow a thousand times, to thank you again and again. Thank you, truly, for giving my ordinary self such an extraordinary experience.

I might not be as chatty online as I once was, but I will continue to write my stories with all my heart. If you would ever like to chat with me, you can find me within the tales I tell.

I’m a person who wants to write from dawn till dusk, and I will strive to never let you down with my stories.

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, and wishing you all the happiness there is.

Rou Bao Bu Chi Rou (Meatbun Doesn’t Eat Meat)
September 20, 2024

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APPENDIX

Characters, Names, and Locations

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Characters

The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.

Note on the given name translations: Chinese characters may have many different readings. Each reading here is just one out of several possible interpretations.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Mo Ran

Surname Mo, “ink”; given name Ran, “to ignite”

COURTESY NAME: Weiyu (/ “gentle rain”)

TITLE(S):

Taxian-jun (/ “treading on immortals”)

WEAPON(S):

Bugui (/ “no return”)

Jiangui (/ literally, “seeing ghosts”; metaphorically, “What the hell?”)

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Wood and Fire

Orphaned at a young age by the death of his mother, Mo Ran was raised in the House of Drunken Jade by the abusive Madam Mo and her son. Later he burned the establishment down, but he was found by Xue Zhengyong and brought back to Sisheng Peak under the mistaken assumption that he was Xue Zhengyong’s nephew. Despite his late start, he had a natural talent for cultivation.

In his previous lifetime, Chu Wanning’s refusal to save Shi Mei as he died sent Mo Ran into a spiral of grief, hatred, and destruction. He reinvented himself as Taxian-jun, tyrannical emperor of the cultivation world, and committed many atrocities—including taking his own shizun captive—before ultimately killing himself. Little did he expect to wake up

in his fifteen-year-old body with all the memories of his past self and the opportunity to relive his life with all-new choices.

Since his rebirth, Mo Ran has realized many things are not as they had seemed in the previous lifetime, a realization that came to a head after Chu Wanning's death while sealing the Heavenly Rift at Butterfly Town. During the five years of Chu Wanning's seclusion following his return from the underworld, Mo Ran wandered the land making a name for himself as Mo-zongshi.

After Hua Binan attacked Sisheng Peak, Mo Ran shattered his spiritual core to protect the sect and succumbed to the injuries inflicted by Tianyin Pavilion. Ultimately, the Demon Lord protected Mo Ran's souls from both lifetimes and allowed him to be reborn.

Chu Wanning

Surname Chu; given name Wanning, "evening peace"

TITLE(S):

Yuheng of the Night Sky (/ Wanye, "late night"; Yuheng, "Alioth, the brightest star in Ursa Major")

Beidou Immortal (/ Beidou "the Big Dipper," title *xianzun*, "immortal") also known as: Xia Sini (/ homonym for "scare you to death")

WEAPON(S):

Tianwen (/ "Heavenly Inquiry: to ask the heavens about life's enigmatic questions"). The name reflects Tianwen's interrogation ability.

Jiuge (/ "Nine Songs"). Chu Wanning describes it as having a "chilling temperament."

Huaisha (/ "Embracing Sand to Drown Oneself"). Chu Wanning uses it rarely because of its "vicious nature."

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Wood and Metal

A powerful cultivator and elder of Sisheng Peak who specializes in barriers and is talented in mechanical engineering. Aloof, strict, and short-tempered, Chu Wanning has three Sisheng Peak disciples to his name—Xue

Meng, Shi Mei, and Mo Ran—and has claimed Nangong Si as a disciple as well. In Mo Ran's previous lifetime, Chu Wanning stood up to Taxian-jun, obstructing his tyrannical ambitions, before he was taken captive, eventually dying as his prisoner. In the present day, he is Mo Ran's shizun and lover. After Master Huaizui's death, he learns he was created from a piece of the Flame Emperor's sacred tree and receives his memories from the past lifetime.

Chu Wanning's titles refer to the brightest stars in the Ursa Major constellation, reflecting his stellar skills and presence. Specifically, Yuheng is Alioth, the brightest star in Ursa Major, and the Big Dipper is an asterism consisting of the seven brightest stars of the same constellation. Furthermore, Chu Wanning's weapons are named after poems in the *Verses of Chu*, a collection by Qu Yuan from the Warring States Period. The weapons' primary attacks, such as "Wind," take their names from *Shijing: Classic of Poetry*, the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry. The collection comprises 305 works that are categorized into popular songs and ballads (/ feng, "wind"), courtly songs (/ ya, "elegant"), or eulogies (/ song, "ode").

SISHENG PEAK

Shi Mei (Hua Binan)

Surname Shi; given name Mei, "to conceal" / Surname Hua; given name Binan, "jade, cedar"

COURTESY NAME: Mingjing (/ "bright and clean")

TITLE(S): Hanlin the Sage (/ "cold, scales"; "highly skilled, sage doctor")

EARLY NAME(S): Xue Ya (/ Surname Xue, given name Ya, "little girl")

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Water

Xue Meng's close friend, Chu Wanning's second disciple, and Mo Ran's boyhood crush, Shi Mei's gentle and kind exterior is a facade for his cold and cunning interior. In the past timeline, he faked his death at the

Heavenly Rift and used it along with the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows to manipulate Mo Ran into becoming Emperor Taxian-jun. After Chu Wanning's death, he traveled into the present timeline using the same Space-Time Gate of Life and Death that Chu Wanning created. In the current timeline, he goes by his real name, Hua Binan, and presents himself as a medicinal zongshi of Guyueye, while his younger self remains a disciple of Sisheng Peak to maintain their control over Mo Ran. Their objective is to allow their persecuted tribe—the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts—to return to the demon realm. Hua Binan ultimately succeeds but sacrifices himself in the process. The younger Shi Mei grows disillusioned with his other self's cruelty and abandons the mission. He now wanders the jianghu as a blind healer.

Xue Zhengyong

Surname Xue; given name Zhengyong, "righteous and harmonious"

WEAPON: Fan that reads "Xue is Beautiful" on one side and "Others are Ugly" on the opposite.

The sect leader of Sisheng Peak, Xue Meng's father, and Mo Ran's uncle. Jovial, boisterous, and made out of 100 percent wifeguy material, Xue Zhengyong takes his duty to protect the common people of the lower cultivation realm very much to heart.

Madam Wang ( ) Wang Chuqing ( )

Surname Wang; given name Chuqing, "first light"

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Earth

Xue Meng's mother, lady of Sisheng Peak, and Mo Ran's aunt. Timid and unassuming, she originally hails from Guyueye Sect, having once been Jiang Xi's shijie, and specializes in the healing arts.

Veggiebun ( )

A fat orange cat with a striped forehead that only eats fish and no other meat.

Xuanji Elder

Xuanji, “Megrez, the delta Ursae Majoris star”

Kind and gentle; practices an easy cultivation method. Popular with the disciples.

Tanlang Elder

Tanlang, “Dubhe, the Flirting Star in Sha Po Lang”

Sardonic and ungentle with his words. Good at the healing arts, and on pretty bad terms with Chu Wanning.

RUFENG SECT

Ye Wangxi

Surname Ye; given name Wangxi, “to forget the past”

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Earth

A disciple of Rufeng Sect, the adopted child of Rufeng Sect’s chief elder. Highly regarded by the sect leader of Rufeng Sect, and a competent, chivalric, and upright individual. Noted by Mo Ran to have been second only to Chu Wanning in the entire cultivation world in the previous lifetime.

Nangong Si

Surname Nangong; given name Si,“to ride” or “horse”

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Fire

Heir to the now-fallen Rufeng Sect. Died in the previous lifetime before Mo Ran’s ascension as Taxian-jun. Died in this lifetime on Mount Jiao in an attempt to save his fellow cultivators. Has a complicated

relationship with Ye Wangxi, his devoted childhood companion, and was engaged to Song Qiutong before the untimely fall of Rufeng Sect.

Nangong Liu

Surname Nangong; given name Liu, “willow”

Leader of Rufeng Sect prior to its downfall and father to Nangong Si. Has a gift for flattery, but has since regressed to a childlike mental state after Rufeng Sect’s downfall.

Naobaijin

Nao, “carnelian”; bai, “white”; jin, “gold”

Nangong Si’s faewolf. Thrice the height of a human, with carnelian-red eyes, snow-white fur, and gold claws.

Song Qiutong

Surname Song; given name Qiutong, “autumn, tung tree”

A Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast who bore a resemblance to Shi Mei. After being rescued by Ye Wangxi, she joined Rufeng Sect as a disciple and was betrothed to Nangong Si. After the fall of Rufeng Sect, she was kidnapped to Mount Huang and killed by Xu Shuanglin. In the previous lifetime, Taxian-jun took her as his wife and empress after burning Rufeng Sect. She also shares a name with a character in *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Xu Shuanglin (Nangong Xu)

( ) Surname Xu; given name Shuanglin, “frost, forest” (Surname Nangong; given name Xu, “willow fluff”)

The embittered brother of Nangong Liu and former disciple of Luo Fenghua. After faking his death, he adopted the false identity of Xu Shuanglin, under which he took in Ye Wangxi as his adoptive daughter and posed as one of Rufeng Sect’s elders.

GUYUEYE SECT

Jiang Xi

Surname Jiang; given name Xi, “dawn, sunshine”

COURTESY NAME: Yechen (/ “deep night”)

The aloof, haughty sect leader of Guyueye Sect. Rumored to be the richest person in the cultivation world. Despite his age, he looks to be in his twenties due to his cultivation method. His weapon is the longsword Xuehuang. Has a highly capable adopted son in Guyueye. Sustained grievous injuries with mysterious after-effects during the final battle.

OTHER CHARACTERS

Mei Hanxue (Younger)

Surname Mei; given name Hanxue, “to hold, snow”

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Wood, Water

A striking cultivator with pale-gold hair and jade-green eyes, Mei Hanxue is the head disciple of Kunlun Taxue Palace who stayed with the Xue family at Sisheng Peak for a short time as a child. He is skilled in various arts, including dance and playing musical instruments, and is an appreciator of wine and song. His weapon is the longsword Shuofeng.

Mei Hänxue (Older)

Surname Mei; given name Hanxue, “icy, snow”

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Fire, Water

A striking cultivator with pale-gold hair and jade-green eyes, Mei Hänxue is the head disciple of Kunlun Taxue Palace who stayed with the Xue family at Sisheng Peak for a short time as a child. He is skilled in various arts, including fending off lady cultivators, and is an appreciator of peace and quiet. His weapon is the longsword Shuofeng.

Translators' note: In the original Chinese, the names of the Mei twins are pronounced identically when spoken aloud while remaining distinguishable in the written text, as they use different characters for "Han." We have opted to mark the elder twin's name with a diaeresis —"Hänxue"—to maintain the distinction between their written names for readers of the English text.

Master Xuanjing (　　)

Abbot of Wubei Temple.

Master Huaizui

Huai, "to bear, to think of"; zui, "sins, guilt, blame"

A monk of Wubei Temple. Originally Xiaoman, a young man of Lin'an who betrayed his fellow humans and caused the death of Chu Lan hundreds of years before the start of *Husky*'s events. He has lived his life attempting to atone ever since, up to and including creating Chu Wanning from a piece of the Flame Emperor's sacred tree to raise him as a body to house Chu Lan's souls. When Chu Wanning dies during a Heavenly Rift, Master Huaizui wields Rebirth, one of the three forbidden techniques, to bring him back from the underworld.

Ma Yun (　)

Courtesy name: Fangzhi (　/ "fragrant")

Sect leader of Taobao Estate. Rumored to be the third-richest person in the cultivation world.

Li Wuxin

Surname Li; given name Wuxin, "'an empty state of consciousness' in Buddhist meditation"

Deceased leader of the recently established Bitan Manor.

Zhen Congming

Surname Zhen; given name Congming, “water gurgling, bright/clever”

The thirteenth direct disciple of Li Wuxin. Ignorant, and ignorant of his own ignorance. His name is a homonym for the phrase “very smart.”

Ming Yuelou

Surname Ming; given name Yuelou, “moon, building”

The leader of Taxue Palace, and an old friend of Xue Zhengyong’s.

Demon Lord ( )

The leader of all the demonic clans.

Qi Liangji

Surname Qi; given name Liangji, “virtuous, lady”

Deceased previous sect leader of Jiangdong Hall. Had an affair with Nangong Liu.

Hua Ruowei

Surname Hua; given name Ruowei, “like a fern”

New leader of Jiangdong Hall who’s very popular among the male members of her sect.

Ling-er

Ling, “water chestnut”; diminutive suffix -er

A farmgirl from Yuliang Village. Charming and bold, she harbors ambitions for a better life outside her small village.

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Sects and Locations

THE TEN GREAT SECTS

The cultivation world is divided into the upper and lower cultivation realms. Most of the ten great sects are located within the upper cultivation realm, while Sisheng Peak is the only great sect within the lower cultivation realm.

Sisheng Peak

Sisheng zhi dian, “the peak of life and death”

A sect in the lower cultivation realm located in modern-day Sichuan. It sits near the boundary between the mortal realm and the ghost realm, and was founded relatively recently by Xue Zhengyong and his brother. The uniform of Sisheng Peak is light armor in dark blue with silver trim, and members of the sect practice cultivation methods that do not require abstinence from meat or other foods. The sect’s name refers to both its physical location in the mountains and the metaphorical extremes of life and death. Xue Zhengyong named many locations in Sisheng Peak after places and entities in the underworld because the sect is located in an area thick with ghostly yin energy, and he is furthermore not the sort to think up conventionally nice-sounding, formal names.

Heaven-Piercing Tower ( )

The location where Mo Ran first met Chu Wanning as well as the location where, in his past life, he laid himself to rest. It’s where Sisheng Peak imprisons the spirits and demons they exorcise.

Loyalty Hall ( )

The main hall of Sisheng Peak. Taxian-jun renamed it Wushan Palace ( ) when he took over the sect.

Red Lotus Pavilion (　　)

Chu Wanning's residence. An idyllic pavilion surrounded by rare red lotuses. Some have been known to call it "Red Lotus Hell" or the "Pavilion of Broken Legs." In the previous lifetime, Chu Wanning's body was kept at the Red Lotus Pavilion after his death, preserved by Taxian-jun's spiritual energy.

Linyi Rufeng Sect

Rufeng, "honoring Confucian ideals"

A prosperous sect in the upper cultivation realm located in Linyi, a prefecture in modern-day Shandong Province. Its seventy-two cities were burned to the ground by Taxian-jun in his lifetime and by Xu Shuanglin in the present timeline.

Mount Jiao (　)

One of the four great evil mountains of the cultivation realm, a relic of its bloody past. It also serves as the burial grounds for Rufeng disciples, earning it the moniker of Rufeng Sect's heroes' tomb.

Kunlun Taxue Palace

Taxue, "stepping softly across snow"

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located on the Kunlun Mountain range. Its name refers to both the physical location of the sect in the snowy Kunlun Mountain range and the ethereal grace of the cultivators within the sect.

Heavenly Lake (　)

A lake in Kunlun Taxue Palace's mountainous territory.

Guyueye

Guyueye, “a lonely moon in the night sky”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located on Rainbell Isle. They focus on the medicinal arts. The name is a reference to the solitary and isolated nature of Guyueye—the island is a lone figure in the water, much like the reflection of the moon, cold and aloof.

Rainbell Isle ( )

Not an actual island, but the back of an enormous ancient tortoise, which was bound to the founder of the sect by a blood pact to carry the entirety of Guyueye sect on its shell.

Wubei Temple

wubei, “without sadness/grief”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm. Disciples of Wubei Temple are monks.

Bitan Manor

bitan, “green pool”

A recently established and up-and-coming sect in the upper cultivation realm. Barriers are *not* their specialty.

Taobao Estate

Taobao, “Peach Treasure”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located in West Lake.

Jiangdong Hall

Jiangdong, the southeast bank of the Yangtze River

A sect in the upper cultivation realm that has recently undergone a couple of tumultuous changes in leadership.

Huohuang Pavilion

Huohuang, “fire, phoenix”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm.

Shangqing Pavilion

Shangqing, “towards heaven”

One of the ten great sects, located in the upper cultivation realm. Shangqing Pavilion and Wubei Temple are the only two sects of the ten great sects to explicitly forbid sexual relationships and dual cultivation.

Tianyin Pavilion

tianyin, “heavenly/divine sound”

An independent organization set up by the ten great sects that oversees trials and the imprisonment of criminals. They manage a prison that is reserved for criminals who have committed heinous crimes.

OTHER

Nanping Mountain ( )

A secluded mountain far from the rest of the cultivation world.

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Name Guide

Courtesy Names

Courtesy names were a tradition reserved for the upper class and were typically granted at the age of twenty. While it was generally a male-exclusive tradition, there is historical precedent for women adopting courtesy names after marriage. It was furthermore considered disrespectful for peers of the same generation to address one another by their birth name, especially in formal or written communication. Instead, one's birth name was used by elders, close friends, and spouses.

This tradition is no longer practiced in modern China, but is commonly seen in wuxia and xianxia media. As such, many characters in these novels have more than one name in these stories, though the tradition is often treated malleably for the sake of storytelling. For example, in *Husky*, characters receive their courtesy names at the age of fifteen rather than twenty.

Diminutives, nicknames, and name tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

Da-: A prefix meaning "eldest."

Doubling: Doubling a syllable of a person's name can be a nickname, i.e. "Mengmeng"; it has childish or cutesy connotations.

-er: A word for "son" or "child." Added to a name, it expresses affection. Similar to calling someone "Little" or "Sonny." Always a suffix.

Xiao-: A diminutive meaning "little." Always a prefix.

Family

All of these terms can be used alone or with the person's name.

Di/Didi: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

Ge/Gege: Older brother or an older male friend.

Jie/Jiejie/Zizi: Older sister or an older female friend; “zizi” is a regional variant of “jieije.”

Mei/Meimei: Younger sister or a younger female friend.

Cultivation

-jun: A term of respect, often used as a suffix after a title.

Daozhang/Xianjun/Xianzun/Xianzhang: Polite terms of address for cultivators, equivalent to “Mr. Cultivator.” Can be used alone as a title or attached to someone’s family name. Xianjun has an implication of immortality.

Qianbei: A respectful title or suffix for someone older, more experienced, and/or more skilled in a particular discipline. Not to be used for blood relatives.

Shishu: Martial uncle. For the shidi of one’s master.

shizhu: “Benefactor, alms-giver.” A respectful term used by Buddhist and Taoist monks and priests to address laypeople.

Zongshi: A title or suffix for a person of particularly outstanding skill; largely only applied to cultivators in the story of *Husky*.

Cultivation Sects

Shizun: Teacher/master. For one’s master in one’s own sect. Gender-neutral. Literal meaning is “honored/venerable master” and is a more respectful address, though Shifu is not disrespectful.

Shizu: Grand-teacher/master. For the master of one’s master.

Shixiong/Shige: Older martial brother. For senior male members of one’s own sect. Shige is a more familiar variant.

Shijie: Older martial sister. For senior female members of one’s own sect.

Shidi: Younger martial brother. For junior male members of one’s own sect.

Shimei: Younger martial sister. For junior female members of one's own sect.

Shigong: Husband of shizun/shifu.

Shiniang: Wife of shizun/shifu.

Zhangmen/Zhuangzhu/ Zunzhu: "Sect leader/Manor leader/Esteemed leader." Used to refer to the leader of the sect. Can be used on its own or appended to a family name, e.g., Xue-zunzhu.

Other

Gong/gonggong: A title or suffix. Can be used to refer to an elderly man, a man of high status, a grandfather, a father-in-law, or in a palace context, a eunuch.

Gongzi: Young master of an affluent household, or a polite way to address young men.

-xiansheng: A polite suffix for a man, similar to "Mister." Often used for teachers.

Yifu: Person formally acknowledged as one's father; sometimes a "godfather."

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Pronunciation Guide

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some (as in “de” in the title below) are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names and sounds from the world of *Husky*.

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NAMES

Èrhā hé tā de bái māo shī zūn

Èr as in **uh**

Hā as in **ha**rdy

Hé as in **hu**rt

Tā as in **ta**rdy

De as in **di**rt

Bái as in **bye**

Māo as in **mou**th

Shī as in **shh**

Z as in **z**oom, ūn as in harp**oon**

Mò Rán

Mò as in **mo**ron

Rán as in **run**ning

Chǔ Wǎnníng

Chǔ as in **choo**se

Wǎn as in **wan**ting

Níng as in run**ning**

Xuē Méng

X as in the **s** in **s**ilk, uē as in **weh**

M as in the **m** in **m**other, é as in **uh**, **ng** as in so**ng**

Shī Mèi

Shī as in **shh**

Mèi as in **may**

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **ewe**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

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APPENDIX

Glossary

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Glossary

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context for the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel as well as provide a starting point for learning more about the rich culture from which these stories were written.

GENRES

Danmei

Danmei (　/ “indulgence in beauty”) is a Chinese fiction genre focused on romanticized tales of love and attraction between men. It is analogous to the BL (boys’ love) genre in Japanese media and is better understood as a genre of plot than a genre of setting. For example, though many danmei novels feature wuxia or xianxia settings, others are better understood as tales of sci-fi, fantasy, or horror.

Wuxia

Wuxia (　/ “martial heroes”) is one of the oldest Chinese literary genres and consists of tales of noble heroes fighting evil and injustice. It often follows martial artists, monks, or rogues who live apart from the ruling government, which is often seen as useless or corrupt. These societal outcasts—both voluntary and otherwise—settle disputes among themselves, adhering to their own moral codes over the law.

Characters in wuxia focus primarily on human concerns, such as political strife between factions and advancing their own personal sense of justice. True wuxia is low on magical or supernatural elements. To Western moviegoers, a well-known example is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Xianxia

Xianxia (　/ “immortal heroes”) is a genre related to wuxia that places more emphasis on the supernatural. Its characters often strive to

become stronger, with the end goal of extending their lifespan or achieving immortality.

Xianxia heavily features Daoist themes, while cultivation and the pursuit of immortality are both genre requirements. If these are not the story's central focus, it is not xianxia. *Husky* is considered part of both the danmei and xianxia genres.

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Terminology

Barriers: A type of magical shield. In *Husky*, a barrier separates the mortal realm and the ghost realm, and Chu Wanning is noted to be especially skilled in creating barriers.

Classical Chinese Chess (weiqi): Weiqi is the oldest known board game in human history. The board consists of a many-lined grid upon which opponents play unmarked black and white stones as game pieces to claim territory.

Colors:

White: Death, mourning, purity. Used in funerals for both deceased and the mourners.

Red: Happiness, good luck. Used for weddings.

Purple: Divinity and immortality; often associated with nobility, homosexuality (in the modern context), and demonkind (in the xianxia genre).

Courtesy Names: A courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. (*See Name Guide for more information*.)

Cultivation/cultivators: Cultivators are practitioners of spirituality and the martial arts. They seek to gain understanding of the will of the universe while also increasing personal strength and extending their lifespan.

Cut-sleeve: A term for a gay man. Comes from a tale about an emperor's love for, and relationship with, a male politician. The emperor was called to the morning assembly, but his lover was asleep on his robe. Rather than wake him, the emperor cut off his own sleeve.

Dragons: Great beasts who wield power over the weather. Chinese dragons differ from their Western counterparts as they are often benevolent, bestowing blessings and granting luck. They are associated with the Heavens, the Emperor, and yang energy.

Dual Cultivation: A cultivation technique involving sex between participants that is meant to improve cultivation prowess. Can also be used as a simple euphemism for sex.

Eyes: Descriptions like “phoenix eyes” or “peach-blossom eyes” refer to eye shape. Phoenix eyes have an upturned sweep at their far corners, whereas peach-blossom eyes have a rounded upper lid and are often considered particularly alluring.

Face: *Mianzi* ( ), generally translated as “face,” is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person’s reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. For example, “having face” refers to having a good reputation and “losing face” refers to having one’s reputation hurt. Meanwhile, “giving face” means deferring to someone else to help improve their reputation, while “not wanting face” implies that a person is acting so poorly/shamelessly that they clearly don’t care about their reputation at all. “Thin face” refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, “thick face” refers to someone not easily embarrassed and immune to insults.

Fae: Fae (/ yao), refers to natural creatures such as animals, plants, or even inanimate objects, who over time absorb spiritual energy and gain spiritual awareness to cultivate a human form. They are sometimes referred to as “demons” or “monsters,” though they are not inherently evil. In *Husky*, faewolves ( ) are a rare and expensive breed of wolf. Similarly, the feathered tribe are beings who are half-immortal ( ) and half-fae.

The Five Elements: Also known as the *wuxing* (/ “Five Phases”) in Chinese philosophy: fire, water, wood, metal, earth. Each element corresponds to a planet: Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn, respectively. In *Husky*, cultivators’ spiritual cores correspond with one or two elements; for example, Chu Wanning’s elements are metal and wood.

Fire (/ huo)

Water (/ shui)

Wood (/ mu)

Metal (/ jin)

Earth (/ tu)

Haitang: The *haitang* tree ( ), also known as crab apple or Chinese flowering apple, is endemic to China. The recurring motif for Chu Wanning is specifically the *xifu haitang* variety. In flower language, haitang symbolizes unrequited love.

Inedia: A common ability that allows an immortal to survive without mortal food or sleep by sustaining themselves on purer forms of energy based on Daoist fasting. Depending on the setting, immortals who have achieved inedia may be unable to tolerate mortal food, or they may be able to choose to eat when desired. The cultivation taught by Sisheng Peak notably does not rely on this practice.

Jade: Jade is a culturally and spiritually important mineral in China. Its durability, beauty, and the ease with which it can be utilized for crafting decorative and functional pieces alike has made it widely beloved since ancient times. The word might evoke green jade (the mineral jadeite), but Chinese texts are often referring to white jade (the mineral nephrite), as when a person’s skin is described as “the color of jade.”

Jianghu: A staple of wuxia, the jianghu (/ “rivers and lakes”) describes an underground society of martial artists, monks, rogues, artisans,

and merchants who settle disputes between themselves per their own moral codes.

Lotus: This flower symbolizes purity of the heart and mind, as lotuses rise untainted from the muddy waters they grow in. It also signifies the holy seat of the Buddha.

Measurements: The “miles” and “inches” in *Husky* refer not to imperial measurement units, but to the Chinese measurement units, which have varied over time. In modern times, one Chinese mile (/ *li*) is approximately a half-kilometer, one Chinese foot (/ *cun*) is approximately one-third of a meter, and one Chinese inch (/ *chi*) is one tenth of a Chinese foot.

Meridians: The means by which qi travels through the body, like a magical bloodstream. Medical and combat techniques that focus on redirecting, manipulating, or halting qi circulation focus on targeting the meridians at specific points on the body, known as acupoints. Techniques that can manipulate or block qi prevent a cultivator from using magical techniques until the qi block is lifted.

Moe: A Japanese term referring to cuteness or vulnerability in a character that evokes a protective feeling from the reader. Originally applied largely to female characters, the term has since seen expanded use.

Mythical Figures: Several entities from Chinese mythology make an appearance in the world of *Husky*, including:

Azure Dragon: The Azure Dragon (/ canglong, or / qinglong) is one of four major creatures in Chinese astronomy, representing the cardinal direction East, the element of wood, and the season of spring.

Ebon Tortoise: The Ebon Tortoise (/ xuanwu) is one of four major creatures in Chinese astronomy, representing the cardinal direction North,

the element of water, and the season of winter. It is usually depicted as a tortoise entwined with a serpent.

Flame Emperor: A mythological figure said to have ruled over China in ancient times. His name is attributed to his invention of slash-and-burn agriculture. There is some debate over whether the Flame Emperor is the same being as Shennong, the inventor of agriculture, or a descendant.

Fuxi: Emperor of the heavens, sometimes directly called Heavenly Emperor Fuxi. A figure associated with Chinese creation mythology.

Jiao dragon: A type of dragon in Chinese mythology, often said to be aquatic or river-dwelling, and able to control rain and floods.

Nüwa: A goddess in Chinese mythology, said to have been the one who created humanity by shaping the first humans out of clay. A prominent figure in Chinese mythology, even outside creation myths.

Phoenix: Fenghuang (/ “phoenix”), a legendary bird said to only appear in times of peace and to flee when a ruler is corrupt. They are heavily associated with femininity, the empress, and happy marriages.

Shennong: The deity and mythological ruler said to have taught agriculture and herbal medicine to the ancient Chinese people.

Vermilion Bird: The Vermilion Bird ( ) is one of four mythical beasts in Chinese constellations, representing the cardinal direction South, the element of fire, and the season of summer.

Yanluo: King of hell or the supreme judge of the underworld. His role in the underworld is to pass judgment on the dead, sending souls on to their next life depending on the karma they accrued from their last one.

Paper Money: Imitation money made from decorated sheets of paper burned as a traditional offering to the dead.

Pills and Elixirs: Magic medicines that can heal wounds, improve cultivation, extend life, etc. In Chinese culture, these medicines are usually delivered in pill form, and the pills are created in special kilns.

Pleasure House: Courtesans at these establishments provided entertainment of many types, ranging from song and dance to more intimate pleasures.

Qi: *Qi* ( ) is the energy in all living things. There is both righteous qi and evil or poisonous qi.

Cultivators strive to cultivate qi by absorbing it from the natural world and refining it within themselves to improve their cultivation base. A cultivation base refers to the amount of qi a cultivator possesses or is able to possess. In xianxia, natural locations such as caves, mountains, or other secluded places with beautiful scenery are often rich in qi, and practicing there can allow a cultivator to make rapid progress in their cultivation.

Cultivators and other qi manipulators can utilize their life force in a variety of ways, including imbuing objects with it to transform them into lethal weapons or sending out blasts of energy to do damage. Cultivators also refine their senses beyond normal human levels. For instance, they may cast out their spiritual sense to gain total awareness of everything in a region around them or to sense potential danger.

Qi Circulation: The metabolic cycle of qi in the body, where it flows from the dantian to the meridians and back. This cycle purifies and refines qi, and good circulation is essential to cultivation. In xianxia, qi can be transferred from one person to another through physical contact, and it can heal someone who is wounded if the donor is trained in the art.

Qi Deviation: A qi deviation (/ "to catch fire and enter demonhood") occurs when one's cultivation base becomes unstable. Common causes include an unstable emotional state and/or strong negative emotions, practicing cultivation methods incorrectly, reckless use of forbidden or high-level arts, or succumbing to the influence of demons and evil spirits. When qi deviation arises from mental or emotional causes, the person is often said to have succumbed to their inner demons or "heart demons" ( ).

Symptoms of qi deviation in fiction include panic, paranoia, sensory hallucinations, and death, whether by the qi deviation itself causing irreparable damage to the body or as a result of its symptoms—such as leaping to one's death to escape a hallucination. Common fictional treatments for qi deviation include relaxation (voluntary or forced by an external party), massage, meditation, or qi transfer from another individual.

Qiankun Pouch: (/ "universe pouch") A pouch containing an extradimensional space within it, capable of holding more than the physical exterior dimensions of the pouch would suggest.

Qinggong: Qinggong ( ) is a cultivator's ability to move swiftly through the air as if on the wind.

Red Thread of Fate: The red thread imagery originates in legend and has become a Chinese symbol for fated love. An invisible red thread is said to be tied around the limb or finger of the two individuals destined to fall in love, forever linking them.

Reigning Years: Chinese emperors took to naming the eras of their reign for the purpose of tracking historical records. The names often reflected political agendas or the current reality of the socioeconomic landscape.

Shidi, Shixiong, Shizun, etc: Chinese titles and terms used to indicate a person's role or rank in relation to the speaker. Because of the robust nature of this naming system, and a lack of nuance in translating many to English, the original titles have been maintained. *(See Name Guide for more information)*

Spiritual core: A spiritual core (/) is the foundation of a cultivator's power. It is typically formed only after ten years of hard work and study.

Spiritual Root: In *Husky,* spiritual roots ( ) are associated with a cultivator's innate talent and elemental affinities. Not every cultivator possesses spiritual roots.

Three Immortal Souls and Seven Corporeal Spirits: Hun ( ) and po ( ) are two types of souls in Chinese philosophy and religion. Hun are immortal souls which represent the spirit and intellect, and leave the body after death. Po are corporeal spirits or mortal forms which remain with the body of the deceased. Each soul governs different aspects of a person's being, ranging from consciousness and memory, to physical function and sensation. Different traditions claim there are different numbers of each, but three hun and seven po ( ) are common in Daoism.

The Three Realms: Traditionally, the universe is divided into three realms: the **heavenly realm**, the **mortal realm**, and the **ghost realm**. The heavenly realm refers to the heavens and realm of the gods, where gods reside and rule; the mortal realm refers to the human world; and the ghost realm refers to the realm of the dead.

Vinegar: To say someone is drinking vinegar or tasting vinegar means that they're having jealous or bitter feelings. Generally used for a love interest growing jealous while watching the main character receive the attention of a rival suitor.

Wheel of Reincarnation: In Buddhism, reincarnation is part of the soul's continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, known as Samsara: one's karma accumulated through the course of their life determines their circumstances in the next life. The Wheel of Reincarnation ( ), translated literally as "Six Realms of Reincarnation," which souls enter after death, is often represented as having six sections, or realms. Each one represents a different "realm," or state of being, a person may attain depending on their karma: the realm of gods, asura, humans, animals, ghosts, and demons.

Yin Energy and Yang Energy: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy which describes the complementary interdependence of opposite/contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and differences. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy may do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish themselves of whichever energy they lack.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rou Bao Bu Chi Rou ("Meatbun Doesn't Eat Meat") was a disciple of Sisheng Peak under the Tanlang Elder and the official chronicler of daily life at Wushan Palace. Unable to deal with Hua Binan's wretched tyranny after Taxian-jun's suicide, Meatbun took Madam Wang's orange cat, Cai Bao ("Veggiebun"), and fled. Thereafter Meatbun traveled the world to see the sights, making ends meet by writing down all manner of secrets and little-known anecdotes of the cultivation world—which Meatbun had gathered during travel—and selling them on the street side.

NOTABLE WORKS:

"God-Knows-What Rankings"
Top of the Cultivation World Best-Sellers List for ten years straight.

"The Red Lotus Pavilion Decameron"
Banned by Sisheng Peak Sect Leader Xue and Yubeng Elder Chu Wanning; no longer available for sale.

"He Who Failed as a People's Teacher"
No longer available for sale due to complaints filed by Yubeng Elder Chu Wanning.

"Bridge Architect Hua Binan"
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Original title "The Care and Keeping of a Beauty with Empty Nest Syndrome: A Biography of Jiang Xi"; title changed due to unknown reasons.

"The Great and Admirable Sect Leader Xue Ziming"
Original title "This So-Called 'Straight Guy' Is Such a Snake"; title changed due to unknown reasons.

Dumb

"The Husky & His White Cat Shizun"
Also being sold in another world.

...and others to come. Please look forward to them.

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THE HUSKY AND HIS WHITE CAT SHIZUN
ROU BAO BU CHI ROU
Wealthy and handsome, yet mentally unstable—He Yu has returned home from overseas with one goal in mind: to win the heart of Xie Xue, the girl of his dreams. However, in his time away, he has nursed more than unrequited feelings. He must confront his long-held grudge against Xie Xue's overprotective brother, Xie Qingcheng, who doesn't think He Yu capable of love.
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Footnotes

Xue Mengmeng's Blind Date Adventures

Chapter 1

[1] From "Three Verses of Swallow Tower," by Tang dynasty poet Zhang Zhongsu.

Chapter 7

[2] A line from "Cypress Boat," in the section "Odes of Bei" in The Book of Songs, an anthology of anonymous works known as the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry.

Chapter 9

[3] From the most famous story in Zhuangzi, about whether Zhuang Zhou was a man dreaming of being a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming of being a man.

Chapter 10

[4] , a near-homophone for bushengqi, meaning "won't lose patience."

[5] An essay from the Tang dynasty containing cunning or deceptive tactics for both military and civil situations.

Chapter 15

[6] , a near-homophone of chengxuyuan, computer programmer. Often used in reference to IT support.

Chapter 17

[7] Quote from “The Spiritual Pivot” in The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon, a classic text of Chinese medicine from around the Han dynasty.

Chapter 19

[8] Written with different, more stereotypically feminine characters for wan (: graceful, gentle) and ning (: freeze, solidify).

Happy Birthday, Wanning

Chapter 1

[9] , literally “dog head,” Chinese internet slang name for the Shiba Inu dog meme commonly known as “Doge.”

Chapter 4

[10] Gou ( ): A surname, but also a homophone for “dog.”

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